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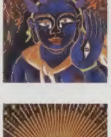
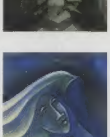
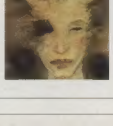
# contents







RIGHT: Paintings, sculptures, prints, and photographs that depict a variety of traditions of myth, story, and ritual are featured in this issue's Gallery. COVER: *Kindred*, ©Matt Hughes, www.MattHughesArt.com



## departments


**6** CONTRIBUTORS

**8** MOVIES, *By Resa Nelson*
Animated, horror, and blockbuster films make spring an exciting time for fantasy.

**16** FOLKROOTS, *By Terri Windling*
Married to magic: Animal Brides and Bridegrooms in folklore and fantasy.

**28** BOOKS, *By Gahan Wilson and Paul Witcover*
Fantasy writers—and readers—are deeply indebted to Lord Dunsany.

**74** GALLERY, *By Ari Berk*
Ancient spirit, modern voice—art as myth.

**80** GAMES, *By Eric T. Baker*
The issue of player gender is solved in a new supplement to *Sorcerer*.


## fiction


**38** SINGING INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE
*By Sonya Taaffe*
Innocence can be immensely appealing, but holding on to it too long can turn it bitter and sour.

**44** TINY BELLS
*By Bruce Holland Rogers*
What's the difference between us and them? Is it finesse with a sword? Courage in the face of danger? Or is it something deeper and older than that?

**46** STALKING THE LEOPARD
*By Tanith Lee*
Where all else has lost its glitter, there remains one mystery to explore.

**52** ON WINDHOVER DOWN
*By Liz Williams*
Better to serve the devil you know than the one you don't. It appears the same holds true for gods.

**56** COUNTRY LIFE
*By Karen D. Fishler*
Ah, the simple pleasures of Arcadia—milkmaids at their pails, farmers in their fields, mysterious creatures in their castles ...

**64** THE ARCHER
*By Ian Donald Keeling*
Love is hard to find under the best of circumstances, and hard to give up under the worst.

**70** CHARLIE THE PURPLE GIRAFFE WAS ACTING STRANGELY
*By David D. Levine*
Cartoon laws of physics: If you don't look down after walking off a cliff, you won't fall. If you smash against a tree, you'll peel right off. If you alienate your readership, you'll die.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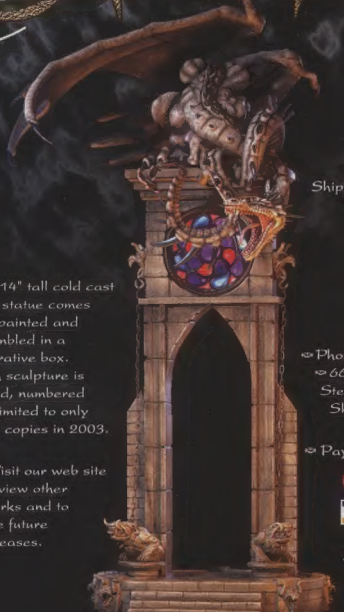

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## Keeper of Time

by Karl Deen Sanders

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By Resa Nelson

# Animated, horror, and blockbuster films make spring an exciting time for fantasy.

This spring brings another batch of fantasy movies, including sequels, remakes, and original stories. One of those risks is positioned as a potential summer blockbuster, while another is an animated import from France. Whether you like a sure thing or a risky proposition, there's plenty to choose from in the next couple of months.

*13 Going on 30* (Sony Pictures), scheduled for release on April 23, treads where many films have tread before. At first glance it looks very similar in concept to *Big*, the Tom Hanks hit in which a frustrated boy wishes to be an adult and magically gets his wish. The difference is, this main character is a girl.

Jennifer Garner (TV's *Alias*) stars as the adult version of Jenna Rink. On the brink of turning 13 years old, Jenna wants to be pretty and popular. She's just made a fool of herself over the coolest boy in school, and she wishes for a new life.

Jenna gets her wish, but it doesn't happen overnight—it only seems that way to Jenna. From her point of view, one minute she's 13 and the next she's suddenly 30 years old. Somehow, everybody else in the world except for Jenna has lived through the past 17 years. In getting her wish, she's managed to jump 17 years ahead in time. Her body has aged ... but her mind, her emotions, and her personality haven't. She's a 13-year-old trapped inside her 30-year-old body.

*DreamWorks' computer animated comedy adventure* Shrek 2 *promises to be as good as, if not better, than the popular first movie.*

Mark Ruffalo (*In the Cut*), Kathy Baker (TV's *Boston Public*), and *Lord of the Ring*'s Andy Serkis round out the cast.

*Shrek 2* (DreamWorks), scheduled for release on May 21, promises to be one of those rare sequels that could surpass the original's success.

Here's why: Although *Shrek* cast both a winking and cynical eye at fairy tales, the movie had a somewhat traditional ending. The ogre Shrek rescues and marries Princess Fiona, who turns into an ogress, thanks to the unforseen results of a spell cast upon her by a witch.

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*ABOVE: Professor Snape (Alan Rickman) protects Harry Potter and friends in* Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. *RIGHT: Van Helsing (Hugh Jackman) takes on Dracula, the Wolf Man, and other famous villans in Stephen Sommers' new film.*

Director Conrad Vernon says, "We wanted to pick up where we left off and take it further, rather than just redo what we had already done in the first one."

Fellow director Kelly Asbury adds, "So many times sequels fall into that trap; they find themselves just a retread of that first movie. That was something we were all very determined not to have happen."

The characters travel to the Kingdom of Far, Far Away so Shrek can meet Fiona's parents, who are shocked by their daughter's new look, as well as her new husband. They were expecting a handsome prince to rescue her, not an ogre.

Asbury describes his greatest challenge in making *Shrek 2*: "Any time you're making a comedy, it's making sure the comedy works in a way that doesn't undermine the emotion of the drama. The balance of those things, and the believability in making you care about the characters while having them funny, is a universally challenging thing when you're making this type of movie."

"For me it was making sure that we took the characters farther in their stories and we didn't rely on what they learned in the past movie to retell it in the second movie," Vernon says. "Finding new misconceptions about the world and how they deal with their fears and any shortcomings they might have and how they get through them. And just making sure those were really interesting and you still believed in the character.

"I'm really happy with the comedy. The comedy is just as great as it was in the first one and everything is just as entertaining to watch. I love the fact that the story is engaging."

*Van Helsing* (Universal) is one of this year's most eagerly anticipated epic action-adventure films, scheduled for release on May 21.

It was five years ago that director/producer/screenwriter Stephen Sommers took a giant step forward in Hollywood with his re-envisioned *The Mummy*. Sommers had been directing for years, all the while knowing Universal was considering a Mummy remake and entertaining a parade of directors and writers who wanted to stick to a low budget and Gothic tone. When Sommers saw an opportunity to step in and pitch his own idea, he grabbed it. Sommers proposed a mummy for the new millenium: an "event" movie full of action, adventure, and romance. He wanted to make a modern-day epic based on one of the oldest monster movies in film history. With the same devotion James Cameron showed in recreating the *Titanic*, Sommers brought ancient Egypt to life, determined to base his script on facts and authentic myths and legends.

It worked. *The Mummy*'s overnight success turned Sommers into Universal's new best friend. Sommers followed up his blockbuster success with *The Mummy Returns* and *The Scorpion King*. These three films have grossed a worldwide box office total of nearly a billion dollars. Universal wisely signed Sommers to a multiple-year deal to write, produce, and direct.

Sommers has always been a fan of Universal's classic monsters, so it should be no surprise that Van Helsing will take on Dracula, the Wolf Man, Frankenstein's monster, and other famous villains.

Hugh Jackman (*X-Men*) stars as Van Helsing opposite Kate Beckinsale (*Underworld*) as Anna Valerious, a woman determined to defeat Dracula and free her family of a curse that's haunted them for generations.

Set in 19th-century London, Rome, Paris, and Transylvania, Van Helsing's world is infiltrated with monsters. In Stoker's novel, Van Helsing is summoned to Transylvania by a friend, Dr. John Seward, who's baffled by the sudden and mysterious illness of Lucy Westenra; once there, Van Helsing recognizes she's been attacked by a vampire. In Sommers' movie, it's a secret society that sends Van Helsing to the mountains of Carpathia on a mission to destroy the Count; once there, Van Helsing joins forces with Valerious.

*The Day After Tomorrow* (20th Century Fox), scheduled to open on May 28, is poised to reign as this summer's blockbuster. After all, Roland Emmerich directs, and he's already delivered *Stargate*, *Independence Day*, and *The Patriot*. Dennis Quaid (*Frequency*), Jake Gyllenhaal (*Donnie Darko*), Sela Ward (TV's *Once and Again*), and Ian Holm (*Lord of the Rings*) star in this big-budget, special-effects-laden extravaganza.

The story's based on the scenario that the greenhouse effect and global warming have escalated to the point of being out of control. The result is worldwide catastrophe and disaster. Tornadoes rip Los Angeles apart. A massive snowstorm buries New Delhi. Tokyo is pummeled by hail the size of grapefruit. Tidal waves and floods destroy cities.

Details are sketchy at press time, but rumors speculate that Quaid plays a scientist who

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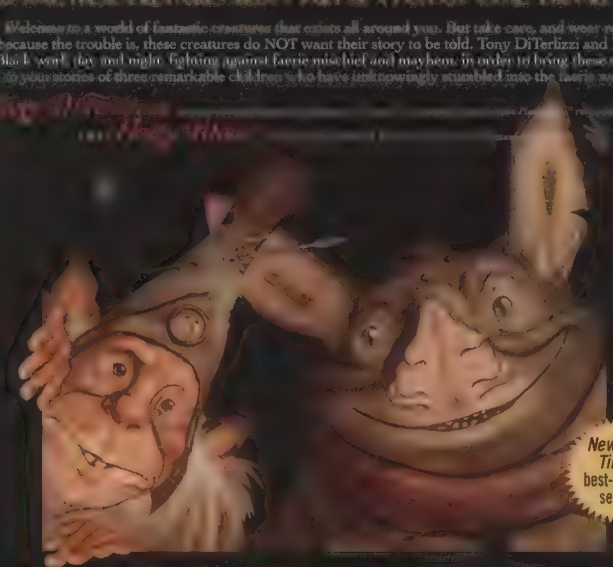

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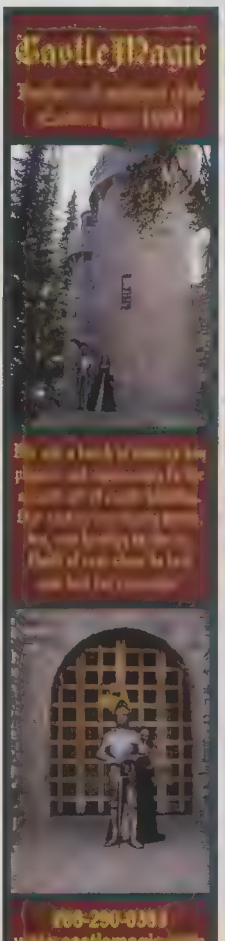
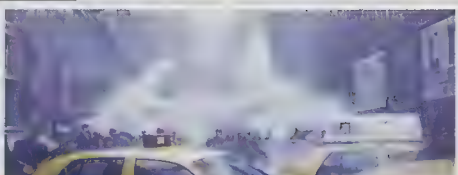
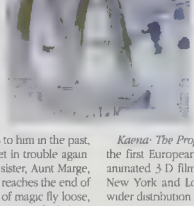


*ABOVE AND BELOW: The greenhouse effect and global warming create worldwide disaster in* The Day After Tomorrow, *directed by Roland Emmerich*

predicts disaster then goes on a mission to rescue his son who's trapped in one of the ruined cities.

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Warner Brothers), the long-awaited third installment in J.K. Rowling's series, finally comes to the screen on June 4. As devoted Harry Potter fans know, Harry is now 13, poised to enter his third year at the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Having spent another dreadful summer with his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon and cousin Dudley, Harry finds it increasingly difficult to keep his magic skills in check in the Muggle world. After all, Harry's an underage wizard, which means he's forbidden to do magic outside the school. The Ministry of Magic has issued warnings to him in the past, and he has no desire to get in trouble again. But when Uncle Vernon's sister, Aunt Marge, shows up for a visit, Harry reaches the end of his rope. After letting a bit of magic fly loose, Harry leaves with his owl in tow, finds himself whisked off by a mysterious triple-decker bus, and winds up spending the rest of the summer at the Leaky Cauldron Inn.



Harry soon learns that Sirius Black, an infamous inmate of the wizards' Azkaban Prison is on the loose. Black was convicted of killing 13 people with a single curse. Some say he's the heir apparent to Lord Voldemort. Worse, Black seems to be hunting down Harry Potter. It's going to be another challenging year at Hogwarts.

The cast returns with one exception. The late Richard Harris's role of Professor Dumbledore now goes to Michael Gambon (*Open Range*). Gary Oldman (*Hannibal*) plays Sirius Black, and David Thewlis (TV's *Dinotopia*) plays the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Lupin.

In an interview on the film's official Web site (azkaban.warnerbros.com), Daniel Radcliffe describes his current commitment to playing Harry Potter. "I will certainly make *Goblet of Fire* [the fourth movie]. After that? Who knows?"

While Chris Columbus directed the first two Harry Potter films, Alfonso Cuaron (*Great Expectations, A Little Princess*) helms the third. Radcliffe describes his experience with the two directors: "I consider myself very lucky to have worked with two great directors on these films. Chris is without doubt the most energetic director I have ever met. He was amazing in keeping us motivated and in encouraging us every step of the way. Alfonso, on the other hand, directs in a more intense way. The scenes in this film are some of the most passionate and emotional I have ever worked on and Alfonso's style has been very helpful to me."

*Kaena: The Prophecy* (IDP Distribution) is the first European feature-length computer animated 3-D film, scheduled for release in New York and Los Angeles on June 4 and wider distribution a few weeks later. Its director, Chris Delaporte, decided to make *Kaena* thanks to inspiration from Steven Spielberg. Ten years ago, Delaporte was working on the *Heart of Darkness* video game, which included 35 minutes of 3-D animation. He shopped the demo around Los Angeles, where Spielberg, George Lucas, and the Disney studios expressed interest.

"Spielberg invited the team who headed the project to his office, and suggested working together on a feature, with one sole condition: that he didn't end up being the fifth wheel," Delaporte says. "But he was turned down! Spielberg's interest opened my eyes up to the possibility of making a 3-D feature film, which we could sell in the States through the bias of a video game. I felt something special would come out of the cinematic scenes if we perfected them."

In pursuit of perfection, the filmmakers landed a star-studded cast: Kirsten Dunst (*Spiderman*) as Kaena, Anjelica Huston (TV's *The Mists of Avalon*), and the late

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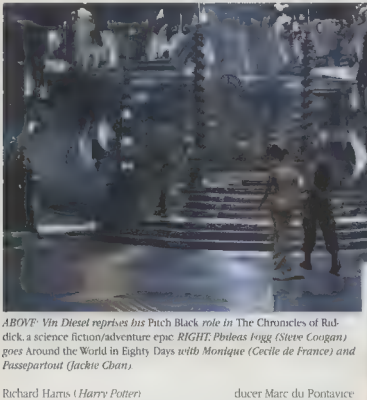


*ABOVE: Vin Diesel reprises his* Pitch Black *role in* The Chronicles of Riddick, a science fiction/adventure epic. *RIGHT: Phileas Fogg (Steve Coogan) goes* Around the World in Eighty Days *with Monique (Cecile de France) and Passepartout (Jackie Chan)*

Photos by David Appleby

Richard Harris (*Harry Potter*)

The world and story are complex. Kaena is a 17-year old girl who's gentle and kind on one hand, rebellious and adventurous on the other. Her world is literally an enormous tree. Kaena's village of 200 people is built on gigantic branches. But this isn't an overgrown *Swiss Family Robinson*. This is a complicated fantasy universe where a tree-world supports different races and whose aerial boundaries are patrolled by flying monsters. Kaena is a heretic among her people, who let religious fervor control their lives. They harvest the tree sap but offer most of it to their gods. When they harvest too much the tree's life is threatened, putting their entire world at risk.

I'd had a complicated view of *Kaena*, a somewhat obscure fantasy saga," says producer Marc du Pontavice. "Yet when I actually read the script, I realized what an extraordinary, beautiful story it was, with a multifaceted world. With a strong central character who turned the film from start to finish and a solid dramatic structure. The story keeps viewers on edge all the way through, strategically revealing things little by little.

The film's look leans toward photo-realistic animation, but at the same time it has an eerie fantasy feel, bordering on horror.

Du Pontavice notes, "This movie is aimed at a teenage and adult audience, with humanoid characters but not using that crazy realism you get in *Final Fantasy*. If *Kaena* works, a whole new vista opens up for our industry, building on a totally new genre. I also believe that the French, with regard to the rest of Europe and to the United States, have something special to contribute. The United States really is the kingdom for cartoon comedy. But in a world like *Kaena*, French talent is just waiting to explode.

"It is an incredibly imaginative venture, with its graphic ambitions and, above all, its thematic audacity, in grasping spiritual mysteries and fantasy at once—the film gives evidence of the kind of vision you only find with truly creative artists."

*The Chronicles of Riddick* (Universal), scheduled for release on June 11, reunites director/writer David Twohy (*Warlock, The Fugitive, The Arrival*) and actor Vin Diesel (*The Fast and the Furious*) in a sequel to 2000's monstrously successful horror flick, *Pitch Black*. New cast members include Karl Urban (*The Two Towers, The Return of the King*), Thandie Newton (*The Truth About Charlie*) and Judi Dench (*The Shipping News*).

Diesel plays Richard B. Riddick, the deadly prisoner in *Pitch Black* who escapes a spaceship that crashes on a desert planet, but ultimately redeems himself when the sun sets and horrific aliens come out in the dark to feast on humans. There's at least one thing special about Riddick: He can see in the dark.

*Chronicles* meets up with Riddick five years after he survives the creepy-crawlies that go bump in the night. Still eluding the law, he's been sticking to the forgotten worlds at the edge of the galaxy. All the while, bounty

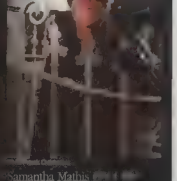
## TV's Salem's Lot

A new and updated version of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* will premiere as a two-part TV movie on June TNT in June. King's novel has been made into a mini-series before, but this version has a heavy-duty cast and brings the story into the present, and features some special effects that are both intriguing and startling. Rob Lowe (TV's *The Lyon's Den, West Wing*) stars as Ben Mears. The series begins when he attacks a priest [illegible] (played by James Cromwell of *Babe*). The story unfolds as a hospitalized Mears reveals what happened when he returned to the small New England town, Jerusalem's Lot.

Mears spent [illegible] years of his childhood in Jerusalem's Lot, where he witnessed a horrible crime that took place in the Marston house, a formidable home perched high atop a hill that looks down on the town. Some people believe the house is haunted, while others [illegible] this crimes committed there are [illegible] force that attracts evil men. Mears shows up in town with his intent is to write about the haunted house, and that's just a cover. He keeps the real reason carefully guarded.

The town is wholesome and all-American on the outside, but plenty bubbles underneath the surface. Infidelity, addiction, and illicit relationships while the townspeople are wrapped up in their daily [illegible] opera, mysterious strangers take up residence in the Marston houses. [illegible] owner Richard Straker (played by Donald Sutherland of *Don't Look Now*) and Kurt Barlow (played by Rutger Hauer of *Blade Runner*). The house is haunted; it's being taken over by vampires.

Andre Braugher (*Homicide*) plays Mears' former teacher who now helps him dig up the town's secrets.



Samantha Mathis (*Mists of Avalon*) plays Susan [illegible], a waitress who becomes Mears' love interest. Check TNT listings for exact dates and times.

hunters are hot on his heels.

Riddick ends up on Helion, a planet in crisis. Its peaceful society has been invaded by Lord Marshal and his Necromongers, an army of warriors. Riddick's locked up once again, this time in an underground prison.

Here Riddick meets up with the only other survivor from the *Pitch Black* planet, a girl named Kyra, now a teenager. Riddick's determined to free himself and Kyra, but his efforts lead them to the Necromonger command ship where he faces Lord Marshal in battle.

Just as *Pitch Black* was a mix of science fiction and horror, *The Chronicles of Riddick* looks to be a blend of fantasy and science fiction. Riddick will learn about his origins, which promise to be mysterious. When he squares off against Lord Marshal, the fate of all people—both the living and the dead—is at stake.

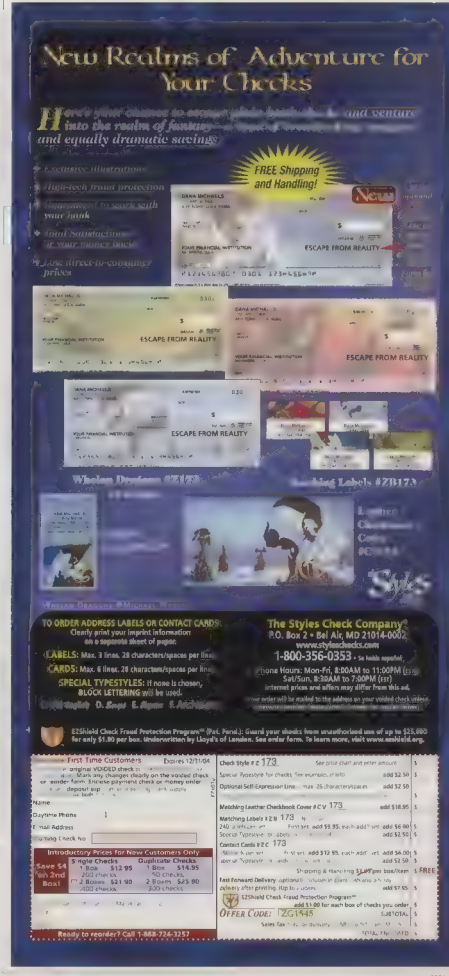
*Around the World in Eighty Days* (Walt Disney Pictures) scheduled for release on June 16, is a remake of a Jules Verne classic that's been made many times as a German black-and-white film in the era of silent movies, in 1956 with David Niven as Phileas Fogg, as an animated series on television as a mini-series starring Pierce Brosnan, and even in a reality TV series with Michael Palin trying to recreate Fogg's attempt to travel around the world in 80 days without the use of an airplane.

However, this century's version has a kick: the amazing martial arts talents of Jackie Chan.

Verne's novel, first published in 1873, was written long before the age of flight. It was a period in time when traveling by air was considered a ridiculous and impossible fantasy by many and a fantastic possibility by others. It was an age when eccentric inventors tinkered with balloon flight, decades before Count von Zeppelin launched his first dirigible. It would be even longer before the Wright brothers showed the world that an airplane really could fly.

Verne's hero is Phileas Fogg (played by Steve Coogan), an oddball London inventor who's discovered the secret to flight. A doubting world dismisses Fogg as a crackpot. Fogg is desperate to be taken seriously, so he makes an impulsive bet with the head of the Royal Academy of Science, Lord Kelvin (played by Jim Broadbent of *Moulin Rouge!*) that he can travel around the entire world in a mere 80 days, an outrageous and unthinkable boast.

Chan plays Passepartout, Fogg's new butler. In this version, Passepartout joins forces with Fogg to save his home in China. However, a bank has been robbed, and it's unclear if Fogg is the bank robber. As Fogg and Passepartout race around the globe, they encounter a Scotland Yard sergeant (played by John Cleese), a San Francisco vagrant (played by Rob Schneider), the Wright brothers (Owen and Luke Wilson), and Queen Victoria (Kathy Bates). Look for action, comedy, adventure and exotic locations.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By Terri Windling

# Married to magic: Animal Brides and Bridegrooms in folklore and fantasy.

Once upon a time there was a poor man who had barely enough to feed his family. As he sat before the fire, sighing over his misfortune, he heard a knock on the window. When he opened the shutters, he found a great white bear standing in the snow. "Don't be afraid. I have come to ask for the hand of your youngest daughter," said the bear. "Only let me take her away, and you shall be paid in silver and gold." The man asked his daughter if she would consent to marriage with the great white bear. "No," she said. The man replied, "But think of your poor family. The bear shall give us silver and gold." At last she agreed. She dressed in her best rags and stepped out into the snow. "Climb upon my back," said the bear, "for we have very far to go."

*In the Russian tale "The Frog Princess," the frog wife changes into a human shape in the marriage bed.*

Thus begins the Scandinavian fairy tale "East of the Sun, West of the Moon"—an Animal Bridegroom tale that bears some resemblance to "Beauty and the Beast" but is older, stranger, more overtly sensual than the latter story. In "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," the heroine and her monstrous suitor live as man and wife *before* the beast's transformation. Each night the bear turns into a man and comes to the heroine's bed. She is not allowed to see his face—but at length she breaks this prohibition, lighting a candle and spilling three drops of tallow on the shirt he wears. "If only you'd been patient," rebukes the bear, revealed now as a handsome prince. "My step-mother placed a curse on me. Had you restrained your curiosity until the space of a year had passed, the curse would have lifted. But now I must go east of the sun, west of the moon, and marry the bride she's chosen for me, with a nose that's three ells long." The heroine proves her loyalty and courage by finding her way to this distant place, transported there by the winds and carrying magic from three ancient crones. She reaches her lover's side the day before he's due to marry a troll. He's overjoyed to see her, and together they hatch a plan. The next morning he tells the troll princess, "I wish to be married in this shirt. But see here, it's marked by spots of tallow. I bid you to wash them out for me, for I shall only marry the woman who can make this shirt clean once more." The troll princess agrees, thinking that this will be an easy task—but the more she washes the shirt, the dirtier and dirtier it gets. Her maids of honor fail as well, and the prince snatches the shirt and cries, "Why, even the beggar at the gates can wash better than you!" The beggar, of course, is his own true love. She easily washes the stains away—whereupon the prince's troll step-mother bursts into pieces with her rage, the prince's curse is lifted, and the lovers are reunited.

This story is similar to "Cupid and Psyche," a tale that appears in *The Golden Ass* (a novel by Lucius Apuleius from the second century AD), where it's told by an older woman to a young girl being held for ransom. Psyche is a girl so beautiful that the goddess Venus grows wild with jealousy. She orders

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Cupid, her son, to harm the girl, but he falls in love instead. An oracle tells Psyche's parents to leave her on a mountaintop, for it is Psyche's destiny to marry a fierce winged serpent. Her parents protest, but Psyche knows they cannot thwart the will of the gods. She travels to the mountaintop, stands bravely to meet her fate, whereupon a gentle breeze carries her to a beautiful palace. In that palace, she's tended and entertained by kind, invisible servants, and each night she's joined in bed by an unseen lover in human shape. This (unbeknownst to the girl) is Cupid, disguised as a winged serpent by day, lest his mother find out that he's disobeyed her orders. Eventually, the girl grows homesick. The obliging breeze is dispatched to fetch Psyche's sisters, who travel to the palace and are amazed to find that she's been living in splendor. The jealous sisters convince Psyche that her lover must surely be a monster—for otherwise, they say, she would be allowed to see his face. That night, shaken by her sisters' words, Psyche takes a lamp and a knife to bed—but when she lights the lamp, she sees it's a beautiful youth who is lying beside her. A drop of oil falls from the lamp, singes his shoulder, and wakes him up. "Is this how you repay my love," Cupid cries, "with a knife to cut off my head? Return to your sisters, whose advice you prefer to mine. You'll never see me again." Whereupon the god and the palace disappear. Pregnant now with Cupid's child, Psyche sets off to search for him and eventually comes before his mother, the source of her misfortune. She humbles herself before the goddess, but Venus is not easily appeased. She sets the girl three impossible tasks, including a journey down to Hades. Psyche prevails, with some timely help from Cupid, for the god still loves her. In the end, the goddess Jupiter intervenes and makes Psyche an immortal. She blesses the marriage of Cupid and Psyche, and the birth of their daughter, named Pleasure.

The three motifs common to Animal Bride and Bridegroom stories are evident in Apuleius's tale: marriage to (or cohabitation with) a mysterious nonhuman figure, the breaking of a prohibition and subsequent departure of the magical spouse (or suitor, or lover), and a pilgrimage to regain the loved one and achieve a more lasting union. A number of tales from the folk tradition, however, end after the second part of this cycle. These are tragic tales (or horrific ones) in which the union of lovers from human and nonhuman worlds cannot be sustained. The selchie tales of the British Isles and Scandinavia generally fall into this category. In a typical story, a fisherman spies a group of seals emerging from the sea. They shed their skins and turn into beautiful maidens upon the shore. As the selchies dance under the moon, the fisherman steals one of the skins. The selchies don their skins and depart, leaving one maiden behind, for she cannot transform without her skin. She begs the man to return her skin—but he refuses, insisting she be his wife. Resigned, she follows him to his cottage and learns how to live on shore. Eventually she comes to care for her husband and bears him seven strong sons. One day, however, she finds the skin and she swiftly returns to her life in the sea. In some versions, she leaves without further thought for the man and children she's left behind. In other versions, the sons also turn into seals and vanish into the sea with her. And in still other variants of this tale, she joins a large bull seal in the waves. "I loved you," she calls back to the fisherman, "but I love my first husband more."

Illustration by D. Boyle

*In the 18th century, Madame Villeneuve created "Beauty and the Beast," one of the best-loved tales of all time*

Similar tales are told of swan maidens in Sweden, of frog wives in China and Tibet, of bear women in North America, of peries (fairies) in Persian folklore, and of aspares (nymphs) in Hindu myth who take the shape of waterfowl. Yet in some stories, Animal Brides and Bridegrooms are less benign figures. In the English tale "Reynard the Fox," for instance, a young woman is pledged in marriage to a handsome red-haired stranger—who actually intends to murder and eat her in his ruined mansion in the woods. The fox-wives of Korea and Japan are beautiful, sensual, highly dangerous creatures who feed on the life energy that they slowly drain from their bewitched lovers. The fox-wives and cat-brides of the British Isles, by contrast, tend to be merely mischievous creatures. In one tale, a young man's red haired bride alarms his mother by her merry, immodest ways. Through a series of tests, the mother learns that her daughter-in-law is a fox-maiden. She convinces her son to chase his bride away—and he later regrets the deed, missing his charming animal wife. In a story from North America, a man marries a bear woman who gives him two fine bear cub sons. All is well until hunters from his tribe, believing they are rescuing their kinsman, track down the bear's winter cave and kill her as she sleeps beside him.

In an Arabic story told by Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, there once lived a mighty sultan whom Allah had blessed with three strong sons. When it came time for his sons to marry, he sought the advice of his councilors, who recommended leaving the choice of brides to destiny. The sultan had each of his sons blindfolded. Bows and arrows were put in their hands. "Shoot," he said, "and wherever your arrow lands you shall find your bride." The first son's arrow fell at the feet of the daughter of a noble lord. The second arrow fell at the feet of the daughter of a wealthy merchant. The third son's arrow fell in the courtyard of an unknown house. The only creature who lived there was an enormous tortoise. "Shoot again," said the sultan. The second arrow landed beside the first. "You must shoot yet again, my son." But this arrow too landed by the tortoise. The sultan sighed and said, "It seems that Allah does not mean for you to wed—for see you here, this tortoise is not of our race, our kind, or our religion."

But the young man cried, "All praise to Allah, but this tortoise is my destiny. I shall marry her, for I swear that my time of celibacy is over."

"How can a man wed a tortoise?" said the sultan, astonished. "That would be a monstrous thing!"

"I have no predilection for tortoises, it is true. Nevertheless, this one will be my bride, for it is the will of Allah," said the son, and the sultan had to agree.

The weddings of the sultan's sons commenced. The first two weddings were splendid indeed, but the third wedding was a strange affair and caused much mocking laughter. The eldest brothers refused to attend, and their wives would not help the tortoise to dress or lay her down in her bridal bed afterward, as was the custom. This saddened the youngest son but still he faithfully honored his wedding vows. He passed the

# DELIVERANCE

(LIBERATIO)

Give a dragon a name and you give it life freedom. In one famous story that may be found on the shelves of Adventure, the wizard Skelestus named one of his creations and watched impassively as the dreadful creature flew away from his high tower to wield untold terror and destruction upon hapless, unsuspecting people

Igniculus (furious fire), an evil voracious beast alighted upon the ruins of an old castle crowning a verdant mound. The dragon soon put all around it to flame, spreading a black pool of desolation about the once fertile land

In a desperate bid to appease the monster the good fathers of the nearest city offered up their daughters for sacrifice. Having been made in the classic vein, Igniculus accepted this traditional bargain in exchange for its abstinence and hungrily awaited the first maiden. The years passed, and the once proud city, prosperous and busy, grew dark and despairing under the weight of its shame. Whereas before the dragon the people had known contentment and plenty now they only knew fear

No one dared to defy the offering or challenge the dragon and soon the people who dwelled beneath the blackened mound became known as the city of the damned. The shameful pact was eventually broken by a knight errant called Othrim who foolishly fell in love with one of the city's doomed maidens. When she, Elana, was selected as that season's victim her bold lover made to her a vow that she would not take the same path as her sisters in death Othrim secretly followed the solemn procession and when Elana had been chained to the sacrificial oak, and her escort had swiftly departed, the knight stole in to the evil place and broke his lover's bonds. They might have made good their escape without hindrance had not their antics been observed by the keen eyes of the dragon

Igniculus rudely interrupted Elana's deliverance and offered terrible battle to the brave Othrim.




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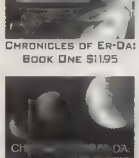

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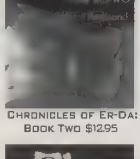

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night with his tortoise bride, and every night thereafter. Whispers flew around the court. How could a man couple with a tortoise? The bridegroom would not speak, nor hear a word against his bride.

Three years passed. The sultan grew ill, for his youngest son was dear to him and the circumstances of the boy's strange marriage preyed upon his mind. "Our very own wives shall prepare your food," said the eldest and the middle sons. "This will tempt your appetite and bring you back to health." Each hurried home and instructed his wife to prepare a dish finer than any known—for surely the son whose wife restored the sultan's health would become the favorite. The youngest son went home and conveyed these tidings to his tortoise wife. "Do not despair," she assured her husband. "Just wait and see what happens." She sent a message to the first brother's wife. "Please be so good as to send me all the mouse dung you can collect in your house. I am preparing food for the sultan, and I never cook with any other condiment." The first wife said, "Why should I help a tortoise? There must be some kind of magic in this. I'll use the mouse dung for myself, and get the better of her." The tortoise sent a message to the second brother's wife, "Please be so good as to send me all the hen droppings you can collect in your yard. I am preparing food for the sultan, and I never cook with any other condiment." The second wife said, "Why should I help a tortoise? There must be some kind of magic in this. I'll use the hen droppings myself, and get the better of her." The tortoise prepared a meal in a silver dish set upon a golden tray surrounded with yellow rose petals, and she sent it to the sultan. When each of the dishes had arrived, the sultan summoned his sons to him. "I intend to give my kingdom," he said, "to the man whose wife restores my health." He lifted the cover from the first dish. The smell of rat turds was overpowering. The old man swooned, and the fetid dish was hastily removed. When the sultan recovered, he lifted the lid of the dish prepared by his second son's wife. The stench of bird droppings filled the air. "Are your wives trying to kill me?" he cried. His sons begged his forgiveness, for this mystery passed their understanding.

"Try the third dish," begged the youngest son.

"What, do you mock me?" the sultan demanded. "If my other sons' wives could not prepare food fit for eating, what can a tortoise do?"

The youngest begged his father to try the food. At last the old sultan consented. As he lifted the lid, a scent finer than the sweetest perfume wafted through the room and every man licked his lips, longing for a taste of the morsels inside. With one bite the old man's eyes grew clear. With the second bite, his spine straightened. With the third bite, the sultan felt younger, fitter, and stronger than he had in years. He ate every morsel in the dish, drank a sherbet of musk and snow, and burped three times to show his satisfaction with the meal.

The story goes on ... two other tests are demanded of the daughters-in-law, and each time the tortoise triumphs, turning the spite of the other wives against them. Finally, the tortoise-wife is summoned to appear before the sultan and his court—and she reveals herself as a beautiful, wise, wealthy, and well mannered young woman. The sultan, delighted, signs his kingdom over to his youngest son—and the tortoise-wife has her old shell burned so that she's never tempted to return to it.

Illustration by Kay Nielsen

*The great white bear carries his bride off in an illustration from "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," a Scandinavian fairy tale*

Similar tales can be found in other fairy tale traditions, such as the Russian story "The Frog Princess" and the French story "The White Cat" -although these tales are more decorous in the depiction of the tasks, and avoid sexual conjecture. In the Russian story the frog-wife transforms into human shape in her husband's bed; in the French tale, marriage doesn't take place until *after* the cat turns back into a woman. In these later tales we're assured that the Animal Brides had actually been human at birth, changed to animal shape by a fairy's whim or a witch's curse. In older stories, like that of the tortoise wife, the bride often *begins* as an ani-

mal (or as a magical shape-shifting creature) consenting in the end to give up her true form to live in the human world.

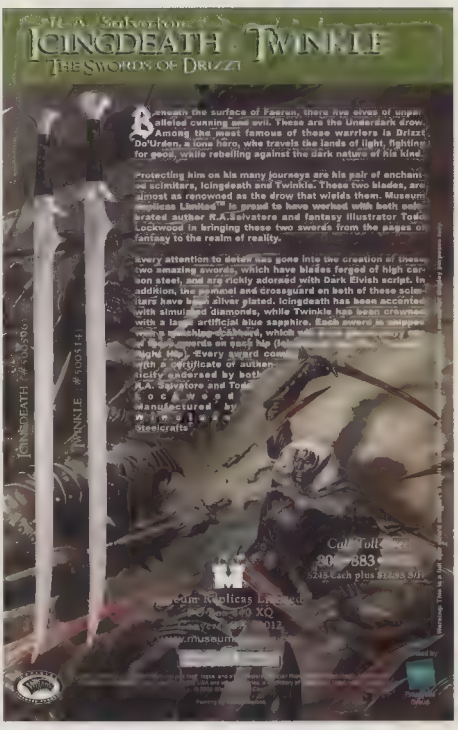
Just as marriage between two people unites their families, so marriage between a person and an animal in myth and fairy tale joins humanity with nature," writes folklorist Boria Sax, noting that changes in the tales as they pass through the centuries have reflected the changing relationship between man and the natural world. The oldest known Animal Bride and Bridegroom tales are generally those limited to the first part of the story cycle- the romance and/or marriage of human beings and animals (or other nature-bound creatures). Tales of this sort include ancestral myths such as the Chinese stories of families descended from the marriage of humans and shape-shifting dragons, or the lore of Siberian shamans who trace their power and healing gifts to marriages between men and swans. Such tales evoke an ancient world view in which humans were part of the natural world, cousins to the animals, rather than separate from nature and placed above all other creatures.

Animal Bride and Bridegroom stories that go on to the second part of the cycle, ending with the loss of the animal lover arise from a world view in which sharper distinctions are made between the human sphere (civilization) and nature (the wilderness). In such tales, humans and their animal lovers come from distinctly separate worlds, and any attempt to unite the two is ultimately doomed to failure.

Stories that move on to the third part of the cycle, like "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" end with the lovers reunited and the transformation of one or both. Such tales notes Sax, express "an almost universal longing to re-establish a lost intimacy with the natural world" and although the tortoise might burn her shell to live in the sultan's court, she brings the scent of the wild with her as she steps into civilization. She will never be an ordinary woman; she'll always be the Fantastic Bride—joining the hero to the mysteries of nature.

The history of animal-human marriage tales reaches back to legends of animal deities and their various mortal lovers found in Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, early Greek, and other ancient mythologies. In the lore of a number of Native American tribes, the Animal People were the first people to inhabit the earth; intermarriage between them and the second people, human beings, could be a blessing or a disaster.

In the Alaskan story of Sedna, for instance, a beautiful young woman is tricked into marriage with a man who is really a sea-bird in disguise, he takes her to live among the birds, where she's cold and miserable. Sedna seizes an opportunity for escape when her father comes to visit her; she hides in his kayak and he paddles away with the bird in hot pursuit. The sea gods send a storm, angry with Sedna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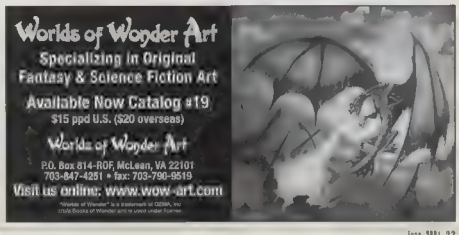
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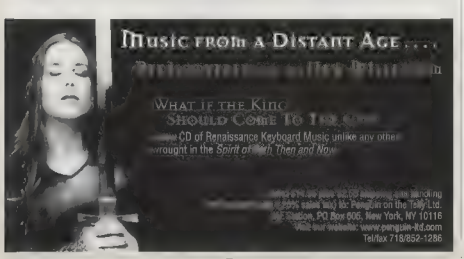
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for breaking her marriage vows. To save his own life, Sedna's father casts the girl into the sea. As she clutches onto the kayak, Sedna's father stabs her fingers to loosen her hold. Three times he stabs her with his knife, and each time her blood mingles with the sea new creatures emerge from the blood: the very first seals, walruses, and whales. At last Sedna sinks to the bottom of the sea, the new sea creatures following her—and there she's lived ever since, joined by her father and her faithful dog. Men now pray to Sedna to send them whales, walruses, and seals to hunt. Bitter and capricious, nursing her sore fingers, sometimes she honors the hunters' requests, and sometimes she takes their lives from them, just as the sea gods once took hers.

In old folk tales, marriage between humans and animals broke certain taboos and could be dangerous, but these relationships weren't generally portrayed as wicked or immoral. Even when such marriages were doomed to failure (selchie wives returning to the sea, for example), often a gift was left behind in the form of children, wealth, good fortune, or the acquisition of magical skills (such as the ability to find fish or game in plentiful supply.) By the Middle Ages, however, animal-human relationships were viewed more warily, and creatures who could shift between human and animal shape were portrayed in more demonic terms. Witches were believed to have animal familiars with whom they had unnatural relations, and in some witch trials, animals were hung and burned alongside their mistresses. One of the best known animal bride tales of medieval Europe was the story of Melusine, written down by Gervasius of Tilbury in 1211. A count meets beautiful Melusine beside a pond and falls in love; she agrees to marry him on one condition: he may never see her on a Saturday, which is when she takes her bath. They marry, and all is well for a time. She builds her husband a sumptuous palace and bears him nine strong sons—but each of the sons is deformed in some fashion, proof that she's no mortal woman. Eventually, her husband breaks the prohibition and spies on his wife at her bath, discovering that she's a snake from the waist down on every seventh day. When the count's trespass comes to light (due to the murderous deeds of the sons), Melusine becomes a serpent and vanishes—appearing thereafter only in spectral form to warn of death and danger. The brutish sons are evidence here of Melusine's demonic nature—although in older versions of her story, Melusine is simply a water fairy. The emphasis of the older tales lies on her husband's misdeed in breaking his promise, thereby losing his fairy wife, rather than on his discovery that he is married to a monster.

In the 15th century, a wandering alchemist by the name of Paracelsus wrote of magical spirits born from the elements of water, earth, air, and fire, living alongside

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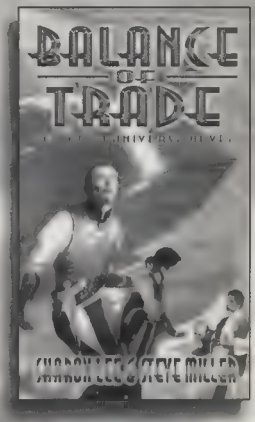


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humankind in a parallel dimension. These spirits were capable of transforming themselves into the shapes of men and women, and lacked only immortal souls to make them fully human. A soul could be gained, Paracelsus wrote, through marriage to a human being, and the children of such unions were mortal (but lived unusually long lives). Several noble families, it was believed, descended from knights married to water spirits (called "undines" or "melusines") who had taken on human shape to win immortal souls. Paracelsus's ideas went on to inspire the German Romantics in the19th century—in tales such as Goethe's "The New Melusine," E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Golden Pot," and especially Friederich de la Motte Fouqué's "Undine," the tragic story of a water nymph in pursuit of love and a human soul. Fouqué's famous tale, in turn, inspired Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* along with other literary, dramatic and musical works of the Victorian era. Many folklorists consider such tales to be part of the Animal Bride tradition, depicting as they do the union of mortal men and creatures of nature.

In the years between Paracelsus and Fouqué, fairy tales came into flower as a literary form in Italian and French publications that eventually spread across all of Europe. Animal Bride and Bridegroom tales were part of this enchanting literary movement. Giovanni Batiste Basile's influential *Il Pentamerone*, for example, published in Naples in the 17th century, includes "The Snake," the story of a princess who marries a serpent, loses him, and then undertakes to win him back—for he's really a prince in disguise. Later in the century, the term "fairy tale" (*conte de fées*) was coined by the writers of the Paris salons, who drew inspiration for their tales from folklore, myth, medieval romance, and prior works by Italian writers. Although Charles Perrault is the best known of them today, the majority of the *contes* were written by women authors, many of whom used fairy tales to critique the French court and restrictions placed upon women of their class. In particular they railed against a marriage system in which women had few legal rights—no right to chose their own husband, no right to refuse the marriage bed, no right to control their own property, and no right of divorce. Often the brides were 14 or 15 years old, given to men who were decades older. Unsatisfactory wives risked being locked up in mental institutions or distant convents. The fairy tale writers of the French salons were sharply critical of such practices, promoting the ideas of love, fidelity, and *civilité* between the sexes. Their tales reflected the realities they lived with, and their dreams of a better way of life. Their Animal Bridegroom tales, in particular, embodied the real-life fears of women who could be promised to total strangers in marriage, and who did not know if they'd find a beast or a lover in their marriage bed.

Madame D'Aulnoy, for example, one of the leading writers of the *contes*, had been married off at age 15 to an abusive baron 30 years her senior. (She ned herself of him after a series of adventures as wild as any fairy story.) By contrast, the lovers in D'Aulnoy's tales are well-matched in age and intellect, they enjoy books, music, good conversation, and each other's company. D'Aulnoy penned several Animal Bride and Bridegroom tales that are still widely read and loved today, including "The Green Snake," "The White Cat," and her tragic King-Lear-type story called "The Royal Ram." As Manna Warner points out (in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*), "Romance—love-in-marriage—was an elusive ideal, which the writers of the *contes* sometimes set up in defiance of destiny." In the 17th century, such ideas were startlingly modern and revolutionary. Today, however (when romantic, companionable marriage is the expected norm), the emphasis on love and marriage in the *contes* can seem sentimental, quaint, even antifeminist. An understanding of the context these stories sprang from reveals them to be quite the opposite.

In the 18th century, another French woman, Madame Villeneuve, borrowed from the Animal Bridegroom tradition to create an original fairy tale that would become one of the best loved of all time: "Beauty and the Beast." Villeneuve's original narrative is over one hundred pages long and is somewhat different in theme from the shorter version

## Further Reading on Magical Marriages

### Nonfiction and Folklore

- *Beauty and the Beast* by Betsy Hearne
- *Lady of the Beasts* by Buffie Johnson
- *In Search of the Swan Maiden* by Barbara Fass Leavy
- *The Serpent and the Swan* by Boria Sax
- *The Frog King* by Boria Sax
- "The Monkey Girl" by Midori Snyder (*Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*)
- *From the Beast to the Blonde* by Marina Warner
- *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* edited by Jane Yolen
- "The Wandering Unicorn" (Melusine tale)

### Novels

- *In a Dark Wood* by Amanda Craig
- *Swim the Moon* by Paul Brandon
- *His Monkey Wife* by John Collier
- *Medicine Road* by Charles de Lint
- *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich
- *The Fox Woman* by Kij Johnson
- *Second Nature* by Alice Hoffman
- *When Fox Was a Thousand* by Larissa Lai
- *Once Upon a Winter's Night* by Dennis McKiernan
- *Beauty* by Robin McKinley
- *Rose Daughter* by Robin McKinley
- *Nadya* by Pat Murphy
- *Beast* by Donna Jo Napoli
- *East* by Edith Pattou
- *The Animal Wife* by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

### Short Stories

- "Beast" by Francesca Lia Block (*The Rose and the Beast*)
- "A Lamia in the Cévannes" by A.S. Byatt (*Elementals*)
- "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" by Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*)
- "The Tiger's Bride" by Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*)
- "The Brown Bear of Norway" by Elizabeth Cole (*Black Thorn, White Rose*)
- "My Lady of the Hearth" by Storm Constantine (*Sirens*)
- "The Tale of the Rose" by Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch*)
- "Brother Bear" by Lisa Goldstein (*Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*)
- "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" by Theodora Goss (Strange Horizons web site, Autumn 2003)
- "Foxwife" by Hiromi Goto (*The Fairy Reel*)
- "The Wife's Story" by Ursula K. Le Guin (*Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*)
- "Beauty" by Tanith Lee (*Red as Blood: Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*)
- "Beast" by Tanith Lee (*Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*)
- "Seal Self" by Sara Maitland (*Angel Maker*)
- "How the Sea Loved Margie" by Laurie J. Marks (Endicott Studio Web site, Spring 2004)
- "The Lion and the Lark" by Patricia A. McKillip (*The Armless Maiden*)
- "The Fox Wife" by Ellen Steiber (*Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*)
- "Skin So Green and Fine" by Wendy Wheeler (*Silver Birch, Blood Moon*)
- "The Great Selchie" by Jane Yolen (*Neptune Rising*)

### Poetry Collections

- *The Poets' Grimm* edited by Beaumont & Carlson
- *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy
- *Outfoxing Coyote* by Carolyn Dunn
- *Transformations* by Anne Sexton
- *Trail of Stones* by Gwen Strauss

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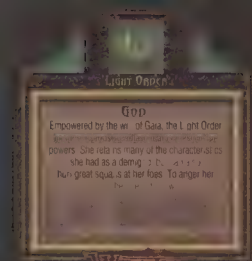
Light Order

## God

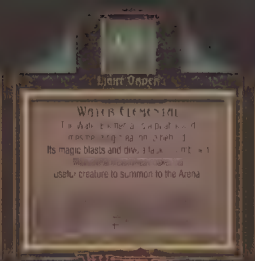
Empowered by the will of Gaia, the Light Order [illegible] powers. She retains many of the characteristics she had as a demigod, [illegible] her great squalls at her foes. To anger her [illegible]



Light Order

## Water Elemental

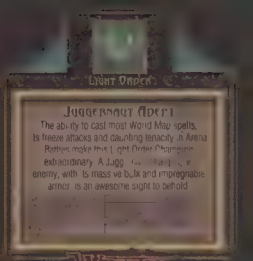
[illegible] its magic blasts and drive [illegible] useful creature to summon to the Arena.



Light Order

## Juggernaut Alpha

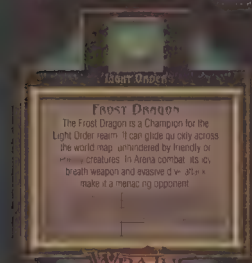
The ability to cast most World Map spells, its freeze attacks and daunting tenacity in Arena Battles make the Light Order Champion extraordinary. A Juggernaut [illegible] enemy, with its massive bulk and impregnable armor, is an awesome sight to behold.



Light Order

## Frost Dragon

The Frost Dragon is a Champion for the Light Order realm. It can glide quickly across the world map, unhindered by friendly or enemy creatures. In Arena combat its ice breath weapon and evasive maneuvers make it a menacing opponent.



Light Order

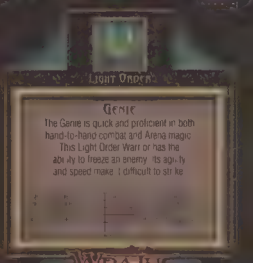
## Ogre Mage

The Ogre Mage's valorous dedication to his creator makes him a capable Champion. When using his saber, Cythera excels in [illegible] and prowess in combat, but is also able to [illegible] energies to shield himself from long-range spells.

Light Order

## Genie

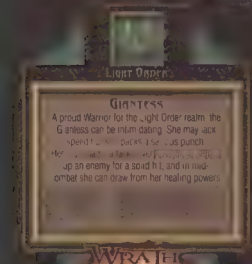
The Genie is quick and proficient in both hand-to-hand combat and Arena magic. This Light Order Warrior has the ability to freeze an enemy, its agility and speed make it difficult to strike.



Light Order

## Giantess

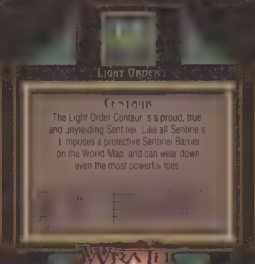
A proud Warrior for the Light Order realm, the Giantess can be intimidating. She may lack speed, [illegible] but is powerful. Her [illegible] can pick up an enemy for a solid hit, and in mid-combat she can draw from her healing powers.



Light Order

## Centaur

The Light Order Centaur is a proud, true and unyielding Sentinel. Like all Sentinels, it imposes a protective Sentinel Barrier on the World Map, and can wear down even the most powerful foes.



Light Order

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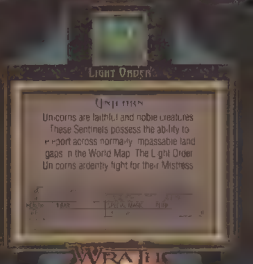

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we know today. As Villeneuve's story begins, Beauty's destiny lies in the hands of her father who gives her over to the Beast (to save his own life) and thus seals her fate. The Beast is a fearsome figure, not a gentle soul disguised in fur—a creature lost to the human world that had once been his by birthright. The emphasis of this tale is on the transformation of the Beast, who must find his way back to the human sphere. He is a genuine monster, eventually reclaimed by civilité and magic.

Some fifty years later, Madame Leprince de Beaumont, a French woman working as a governess in England, shortened Villeneuve's story and published this new version in a magazine for well-bred young ladies. She tailored her version for her audience, toning down the sensual imagery and implicit critique of forced marriages. She also pared away much unnecessary fat—the twisting subplots begun by Villeneuve—to end up with a tale that is less adult and subversive, but also more direct and memorable. In the Leprince de Beaumont version (and subsequent retellings), the story becomes a didactic one. The emphasis shifts from the Beast's need for transformation to the need of the *heroine* to change—she must learn to see beyond appearance and recognize the Beast as a good man *before* his transformation. With this shift we see the story change from one of critique and rebellion to one of moral edification aimed at younger and younger readers, as fairy tales slowly moved from adult salons to children's nurseries. By the 19th century, the Beast's monstrous shape is only a kind of costume that he wears—he poses no genuine danger of sexual threat to Beauty in these children's stories.

In 1946, the tale started making its way back out of the nursery in Jean Cocteau's remarkable film version, *La Belle et la Bête*. Here, the Beast literally smolders with the force of his sexuality, and Beauty's adventure can be read as an emphasis for her sexual awakening. This is a common theme in a number of Animal Bride and Bridegroom tales from the mid-20th century onward, when fairy tale stories, novels and poetry became increasingly popular with adult readers. Angela Carter became the leading light in this movement with the publication of her ground-breaking story collection *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979, containing two powerful, darkly sensual riffs on the Animal Bridegroom theme. "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride." With the works of Carter and writers of her ilk (in mainstream literature, fantasy literature, and feminist poetry) we have come full circle—these are Animal Bride and Bridegroom tales intended for adults once again, exploring issues of gender, sexuality, race, culture, and the process of transformation.

One distinct change marks modern retellings, however—reflecting our changed relationship to animals and nature. In a society in which most of us will never encounter true danger in the woods, the bear who comes knocking at our window is not such a frightening creature, instead, he's exotic, almost appealing. Where once wilderness was threatening to civilization, now it's been tamed and cultivated (or set aside and preserved); the dangers of the animal world now have a nostalgic quality, removed as they are from our daily existence. This removal gives "the wild" a different kind of power; it's something we long for rather than fear. The Animal Bride or Bridegroom, the Beast, the Other from the heart of the woods—they reunite us with a world we've lost, reawakening the wild within us. We see this theme in contemporary fiction by Louise Erdrich, A.S. Byatt, Alice Hoffman, Charles de Lint, Paul Brandon, and numerous others, in films such as *The Secret of Roan Inish*; in art by Susan Seddon Boulet, Virginia Lee, and sculptors Gene and Rebecca Tobey. These are works that explore the borderland between wilderness and civilization and find magic therein.

Looking at the role of Animal Bridegroom, Marina Warner writes: "In her encounter with the Beast, the female protagonist meets her match, in more ways than one. If she defeats him, or even kills him, if she outwits him, banishes him, or forsakes him, or accepts him and loves him, she arrives at some knowledge she did not possess, his existence and the challenge he offers is necessary before she can grasp it."

Of the Animal Bride, Midori Snyder writes: "It is the task of the hero to wrestle with the ambiguous power of the fantastic world and return with its fully creative potential in hand. The young Prince proves his loyalty and compassion, and from the [animal's] beastly skin there emerges a beautiful bride. The bride is unlike her mortal counterparts, no matter how brave and courageous they may appear in the other tales, for she presents a union, a partnership between the human hero and the creative forces of the fantastic world."

The Animal Bride and Bridegroom represent the wild within each one of us as well as the wild within our lovers and spouses, the part of them that we can never fully know. They represent the Others who live unfathomable lives beside us—cat and mouse and coyote and owl—and the Others that live only in the dreams and nightmares of our imaginations. For thousands of years, their tales have emerged from the place where we draw the boundary lines between animals and human beings, the natural world and civilization, women and men, magic and illusion, fiction, and the lives we live. Those lines are drawn in sand, they shift over time, and the stones are always changing. Once upon a time there was a poor man who had barely enough to feed his family. Yesterday a bear knocked at his window. Today Edward Scissorhands stands at the door. Tomorrow? There will still be Beasts, and there will still be those who transform them with love. ❧

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Whitmore

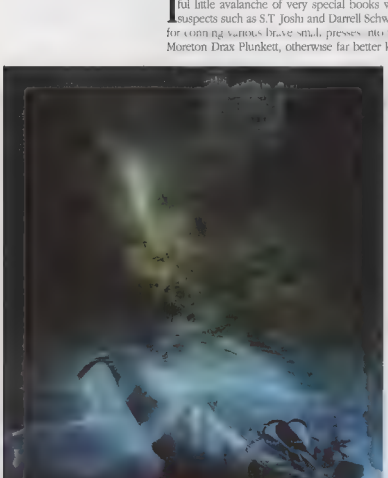
# Fantasy writers—and readers—are deeply indebted to Lord Dunsany.

If it weren't for the fact that the same names seem to keep popping up on these things, one would be tempted to think the mystic turnings of some vast cosmic wheel were responsible for the delightful little avalanche of very special books we've gotten of late. The repeated appearance of usual suspects such as S.T. Joshi and Darrell Schweitzer indicates that these are the gentlemen responsible for conning various brave small presses into taking a chance and hauling the works of Edward Lucas Moreton Drax Plunkett, otherwise far better known as Lord Dunsany, from the dusty shelves of rare book dealers and more fortunate collectors and making them magically available to the rest of us. Bless their hearts, say I. May their efforts thrive and may the publishers who went along with them make at least a little money from taking this laudable risk.

Since our educational system has been seriously short-changing its students through recent decades as much as possible, indeed highly probable, that even the sort of reader drawn to *Realms of Fantasy* (one such is yourself, in short) is only dimly aware of Lord Dunsany since, until this new and delightful appearance of his books broke out, all but his very best known works have remained stubbornly out of print and legendarily hard to get one's hands on for a terrible stretch of time.

Even if you haven't read the man himself you're still deeply in his debt since his writings have heavily influenced, and it's fair to say partially created, the likes of Tolkien, Leiber, Lovecraft, and a number of other guys who have in turn passed on their Plunkettian tendencies to those whose books are advertised in this magazine and whose works appear on its pages.

***In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*** (edited with an introduction and notes by S.T. Joshi, Penguin Classics, New York, 400 pp., trade paperback, $14.00) is a very good introduction for anyone interested in learning the Dunsany basics. His biography and basic data are deftly sketched out, a good general survey of his varied writing and how it developed and moved along from one creative period of interest and approach to another is clearly described, and the collection is laid out in sections like a good textbook so that the reader can savor a variety of well chosen examples of his shorter works sequentially clumped together in their historical periods and see for him- or herself how each tale is influenced and supported by the others in these varying creative eras and get a good idea of how they interacted and spurred the author on.



*Visionary writer Michael Cisco blazes an unconventional literary trail in* The Tyrant, *from Prime Books*

The first section, "Pegana and Environs," explores the wonderfully unique early works included in the spreading out from his first collection, *The Gods of Pegana*, which won over various mighty influential critics, permanently established the author's reputation, and ensured that he would never again have to dig into the Dunsany estate coffers to self-publish.

These marvelous accounts of the doings of bizarre deities and the poor humans saddled with them were essentially based on his awed childhood fascination with the great ancient myth cycles and his later explorations of Friedrich Nietzsche's dark philosophy and syntax. There had never been anything quite like these stories before and there is no possibility of accurately counting how many wonderful creations of later authors would never have come to be had those authors not stumbled into *Pegan*

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The second section, "Tales of Wonder," presents a loving selection from Dunsany's early short fantasies which had a fantastic freshness and wide-eyed wonder that still effectively stuns and startles. Here you'll find gems such as "The Sword of Welleran," "Idle Days on the Yann," and "A Shop in Go-By Street." You will love them and never forget them.

The third section is a sampling of Dunsany's prose poems, which are among the best works ever done in that form. I will never forget reading "Where the Tides Ebb and Flow" and how it stirred me when I was seventeen. I've just reread it and it still does.

A fourth section is aptly named "Fantasy and Reality" as it shows Dunsany more openly exploring the daily flesh and blood world which he often confessed was the real source of his fantasies. There is a fifth section about Jorkens (more of him later), and a lovely culling of "Some Late Tales" that aptly demonstrates both how the author's scalpel sharpened with age and how he managed to handle the sometimes depressing insights that very often come with the accumulation of years.

It would be hard to imagine a better starter kit.

As Dunsany's career as a novelist became increasingly successful, his short work appeared less and less and then stopped altogether. He considered writing factual accounts of his travels and adventures in far off, exotic places, which had been considerable and sometimes spectacular, but eventually abandoned the idea because he felt it might make him look like an elderly braggart. Then he hit upon the excellent and inspired notion of using all that marvelous material to provide the background for a series of tales told by a fictitious braggart.

He called the old fellow Jorkens and made him a regular at the Billiards Club—one of those comfortable institutions shaped and maintained by the advantaged to shelter themselves from the many tribulations suffered by the less fortunate. Jorkens would, if encouraged by the sipping of a whiskey and soda, or possibly two of them, considerately spin some fabulous tale of high adventure and low probability to entertain the one who'd provided the refreshment.

This formula took wonderful advantage of one of the most effective and most pleasant aspects of British fictional biography: To recall dreadfully dangerous adventures taking place in remarkably risky environments from the vantage point of one who is warm and well fed and in as safe and cozy an environment as can be imagined. Not only is it delightfully luxurious to contemplate awful goings-on in comfy conditions, but the spooky dangers in the tale are remarkably heightened by their contrast with the highly pleasant present. Also, setting the stories in a place that is totally predictable—down to such irresistibly loveable items as the club grump who will reliably snuff disdainfully at some bright stroke in Jorkens' latest tale because he's green with envy for never having had anything like that much fun—does the already remarkable range of strangeness in these lovely tales no harm at all and gives the surprising turns a nice little extra glow.

These stories (***The Collected Jorkens by Lord Dunsany,*** introduced and edited by S.T. Joshi with a preface by Edward Plunkett, the current Lord Dunsany, and a foreword by Sir Arthur C. Clark. Night Shade Books, Portland,

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OR, 334 pp., trade hardcover, $35.00) may not be the very best of Dunsany's work –that's because his best work is so dazzlingly good— but I've never come across any writer who's done this sort of thing better.

I am delighted we'll all now have a chance to hear the dear old duffer tell us each and every one of his charming fibs.

Wildside Press and Darrell Schweitzer have brought out a fine array of Dunsany books that were practically impossible to get your hands on. Not only is ***Tales of War*** (Expanded Edition, edited with an introduction by Darrell Schweitzer, Wildside Press, Holicong, PA, 110 pp., trade paperback, $12.95) one of the rarest, but they've somehow managed to dig up two tales that were in the original series but never included in the original book!

It's a very uneven collection for the excellent reason that it was written by Dunsany for the British War Department in 1918 for propaganda purposes and, thanks to Schweitzer's excellent introduction, one can imagine the uniformed ninnies who ran it and doubtless breathed down the back of Dunsany's neck as he wrote them. The military types of the period apparently did not much take to Dunsany and one suspects he cordially returned this lack of affection, so it's actually quite astounding to see what he managed to get away with.

The pain and anger and the compassion—in these pieces is no doubt in great part due to the fact Dunsany had only recently been deeply involved in the actual fighting of the ghastly and unbelievably ineptly managed trench battles of the ongoing war and had personally witnessed the loss of many dear friends in the horrific struggle. They also very clearly show the poor man was, without any doubt, deeply exhausted and psychically battered.

They are all very short pieces and range from musings on what a war will do to spring to the vileness of the Kaiser to gently rendered recollections of soldiers' conversations on how turnips can survive where towns and armies are so brutally destroyed they leave no trace.

There is considerable and thoroughly understandable rage and drum thumping throughout this little book, but what always stayed with me from my first reading a long time ago is its great underlying tenderness.

The essay that moved me the most—and one that I think relates to our present awful position today with horrible relevancy was one of the two new found ones that have never been included in this book before. I'd like to end this section on good old Dunsany with a shortened version of the master's own unedited words.

It's called "One More Tale" and it's about Dunsany's encounter with an old, shabby, outcast woman incongruously carrying a shriveled palm and running at full tilt, but moving only slowly toward the world on a long, dusty road coming down from the moon.

*"I'm sure there's a lot as needs me," she mumbled and sighed and said over and over again "O dearie, dearie me."*

*Far over her poor bowed head and dejected face flew and turned and gambolled going no faster than she, a flock of doves that shone so purely white in the twilight, which gleams between Earth and Moon, that I knew her by this to be Peace.*

*She was hobbling, all unwittingly, straight for the world.*

*"You can't come here," I said as soon as I saw what she wanted. "You can't come here, you know."*

*The words were on my lips as reveille woke me.*

Clark Ashton Smith was an author profoundly influenced by Lord Dunsany, and ***The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*** (Wildside Press, Holicong, PA, 106 pp., trade paperback, $15.00) is a reprint which, as the cover blurb succinctly and tellingly says, "was originally published by the *Auburn Journal* in 1933 in an oversized edition limited to only 1,000 copies. Smith carefully signed and hand-corrected many typographical errors for years to come."

The image called up by the blurb is typical of Clark Ashton's harried and difficult career. He started with a huge bang, his early poems trumpeted by the West Coast Romantics, most particularly by the poet George Sterling, who was then in great artistic vogue. All these luminaries enthusiastically welcomed him to their pantheon and praised him to the skies.

With such a glorious commencement it must have seemed to all, and I am sure it did to Smith, that he was only at the beginning of a sure climb to international adoration and a secure and envied place in the Valhalla of the poets.

Unfortunately, the romantic movement was at that very moment blindsided by a wild veer in literary fashion. The romantic way of looking at life fizzled and died and collapsed into tiny, dusty piles like Count Dracula hit by sunlight, and then a huge tide of gritty realists flushed any pathetic remains down (as the present West Coast powers often so poetically put it) the toilet.

When Smith realized his poetry would not support him financially, he returned to writing the fiction Sterling had lured him away from and found he could sell it to the more bizarre pulp magazines of the period, most reliably the legendary *Weird Tales*.

When attempts to eke out an income from these stories by having them printed in anthologies by existing publishers failed, he made some sort of an arrangement with the local paper to print a collection of six of them.

The original is a kind of pamphlet of thirty pages, 8¾ inches wide and 11½ inches deep with a gray paper cover, all of it bound together with two staples. The staples in the copy I am familiar with are rusted, the text is indeed edited by Smith, and it is signed by him. Within its pages is a postcard stamped by the Auburn Post Office JAN 16 PM 1940 and addressed to a Mark Markham, M.D., in the Bronx with a very polite request that he remit 25 cents to pay for it and I really hope the good doctor responded positively as I'm sure Smith could have used the quarter.

The stories in this second edition of the book are still every bit as brilliant and lovely as they were in the first.

Donald Sidney-Fryer and Clark Ashton Smith overlap in a multitude of ways. They were friends and they both found a home for their works in August Derleth's Arkham House (the original volume in this present series, *Songs and Sonnets Atlantean, 1971*, was the last book Derleth shepherded into print). Since Smith's death, Don has championed his work in all manner of ways, probably most impressively in his huge bibliography of Smith's work, *Emperor of Dreams*.

***Songs and Sonnets Atlantean, the Second Series*** (Wildside Press, Holicong, PA, 152 pp., trade paperback, $15.00) carries on in the tradition of the first book with numerous poems written in a multitude of widely varied forms, all of them skillfully handled, many of them accompanied with interesting and sometimes highly amusing essays and expansions.

Fantasy and history interweave in all kinds of complicated ways throughout the book. Sometimes the works are isolated and on their own, but very often they relate productively with one another, combining, as his other works did in the first book, into a kind of glorious pageant such as might be put together by some eccentric and highly imaginative medieval monarch, a sort of nighttime Mardi Gras parade full of sparkle and music bravely glittering and sounding against a surrounding darkness and ominous silence.

Looming over all of this is the long narrative poem, "A Vision of a Castle Deep in Averonne." It goes on for almost sixty pages, and that does sound formidable, but it pulls you in effortlessly, glides you through its mazes and surprises with astounding smoothness, and finally leaves you smiling fondly back at its heroine. It is an amazing work altogether and charming in all sorts of senses of the word.

# WINTERTIDE

## BY LINNEA SINCLAIR

## A STORY OF SORCERY, TREACHERY AND LOVE

"WINTERTIDE is a fabulous story... Filled with fascinating characters, this novel will satisfy even the most discriminating of readers. I heartily give WINTERTIDE 5 stars and am looking forward to reading many more novels from this author."

*-- Goldie Thomas, Sime~Gen Reviews*

"WINTERTIDE will remain in one's memory long after the last page is turned. The telepathic cat, the mysterious wizard and the dangerous sorcerer all result in a mystical and surreal world of danger and intrigue. Richly detailed and carefully plotted, the author's gift of storytelling creates a magical spell that haunts the imagination. With such a richly plotted tale and fascinating legacies, I would like to see a sequel of WINTERTIDE. Very highly recommended."

*-- Cindy Penn, WordWeaving*

"5 Stars! I thoroughly enjoyed WINTERTIDE. Full of twists, memorable characters and beautiful descriptions, Ms. Sinclair had proven that she truly is a mistress of fantasy... A definite keeper, destined for many rereads."

*-- Sharon McGinty, Sime~Gen Reviews*

WINTERTIDE was a book I just couldn't put down. I didn't expect to enjoy this book—I'm not very familiar with wizards, demons and incantations- but a few pages into the book I was completely engrossed and didn't put it down until it was finished

*--Sue, Road to Romance*

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As is the whole book

Tom Pomplun has put together no less than eight of his lovely Graphic Classics through the years, each one throwing a wildly entertaining party celebrating such intriguing authors as Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce, H.P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker, H.G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle, by having their works affectionately examined and interpretively illustrated by some of the best and most creative graphic artists working today.

All sorts of approaches are allowed and encouraged. A cartoonist may illustrate some story, or a quote from some story, with one drawing, do a whole series of drawings scattered through the text, turn the thing into a spread of several pages, or go all the way and turn it entirely into a graphic comic strip.

The latest one out, ***Graphic Classics Mark Twain*** (edited and published by Tom Pomplun, Eureka Productions, Mount Horab WI, 144 pp., trade paperback, $9.95) features an author begging to be played with by talented cartoonists, namely Mark Twain, and Pomplun sees to it that they take full advantage of their opportunity.

The book starts out with a neat little speech given by Twain on the occasion of his seventieth birthday that celebrates the advantages of geezerdom and dismisses survival advice (including his own) with the very Zenlike adage: "We can't reach old age by another man's road." This is illustrated with a simple but effective drawing by Mark Dancey showing a wry old Twain perched in a rocking chair atop an Alp, then immediately dives into the longest piece in the book which is the masterful Rick Geary's marvelous interpretation of "The Mysterious Stranger"—possibly Twain's darkest vision. Then the book lunges off into a hilarious account by Twain of an adventure on the lecture circuit adapted and illustrated with appropriately broad strokes by Milton Knight, moves on from there to Kevin Atkinson's treatment of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," and launches itself into the very funny "The Legend of Sagenfeld," a Twainian takeoff I never saw before on an Arabian Nights-style legend marvelously illustrated by Evert Geradts—and we are only getting started.

I know from personal experience that Pomplun is a scrupulous editor and, in the best sense, micromanages every thing about each issue of Graphic Classics from discussions on the first vague notion all the way through to the final last technical touches on the production of each book ("magazine" doesn't seem up to describing the final product). I confess I am in awe of his determination and energy and feel it's high time I brought this extraordinary series to your attention in the hopes you'll check out an issue or two of Graphic Classics' treatment of your favorite authors and maybe even get you started on routinely buying them as they come out. They are, each and every one of them, well worth your time.

***Gahan Wilson***

***Alphabet of Thorn,*** Patricia A. McKillip, Ace, New York, 320 pp., hardcover, $22.95, ISBN: 0-441-01130-6

This past October, Patricia McKillip picked up her second World Fantasy Award for the novel *Ombria in Shadow*; she won her first—the very first World Fantasy Award ever—in 1975, for *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*. *Alphabet of Thorn* doesn't rank among her best work, but its virtues, and even its failings, show why she is such an interesting writer.

The kingdom of Raine is about to crown a new ruler. The soon-to-be queen, Tessera, daughter of the dead king, is a dreamy young girl who evidences little aptitude or desire for the burdens thrust so precipitously upon her. But she must assume them

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and commandingly, for the nobility will rise up against her at the first sign of weakness.

Tessera has more to worry about than civil war. Buried in a cave midway down the cliff that plunges from the castle to the sea are the mortal remains of the first king of Raine, who, it is said, "in a time of grave crisis and peril ... will wake and ascend the steps again to defend the Crowns of Raine." That time has come, or so believes Vevay, a sorceress who serves Tessera as kind of fairy godmother-cum-prime minister. When Vevay hauls Tessera down to the tomb, the royal spirit warns the new queen to "Beware the thorns."

Meanwhile, Nepenthe, a young transcriptor in the vast library of the palace, has received from the mages of the Floating School a strange book for translation. It is a book impervious to translation by magical means, written in a script that resembles "brambles curling and twisting around one another, linked by their sharp spurs." Nepenthe, as her name suggests, doesn't know much of her past: she's an orphan, discovered on the edge of the cliff as an infant and taken into the castle for a life of service in the royal library. But she is a genius at translation. The thornlike alphabet of the book whispers its secrets to her, so that before long she is piecing together a history of two characters from the mythic past. Needless to say, the warning given to Tessera will turn out to involve this book and its story, as well as Nepenthe's mysterious past.

Like many fantasy writers, McKillip incorporates classic fairy tales and myths into her work, deconstructing and then reconstructing them as she goes, often from a feminist perspective. But few writers are her equal when it comes to evoking the numinous qualities of fairy tales. How she accomplishes this magic is a mystery I prefer to enjoy rather than analyze, but it is this ability, even more than her graceful prose style, that distinguishes her books. They are not just assembled out of fairy tale spare parts, like so many books in the genre; they *are* fairy tales. In this respect, *Alphabet of Thorns* does not disappoint.

But...

Fairy tales do not so much follow a plot as unfold according to a nonlinear dream logic that, for all its apparent arbitrariness, is actually inevitable. Not that we know from the outset how a fairy tale is going to end, but once it *has* ended, we see quite clearly that no other ending was possible. Fairy tales are clockwork mechanisms, and the characters that populate them are powerless to change their fate. In a novel, however, readers expect characters to grow and change, to earn their fate through their actions rather than through their profession, birth order, or some similar characteristic. The static fairy tale and the dynamic novel, fate and free will, struggle for dominance in McKillip's books. Will her characters break free of the trap of destiny, break out of the fairy tale in which they find themselves into lives of more modern-spirited authenticity? That is the driving question in her novels, and their success or failure hinges on how convincingly she can portray the struggle and its resolution not only in the events of the novel, but in the hearts of her characters.

In *Alphabet*, the working out of the fairy tale pattern is so complex—twining through time, legend, and even, with a postmodern twist, text itself—that there is not enough room for McKillip's characters to come to life. At the moment of truth, when the pattern stands revealed in its thorny but undeniable beauty, Nepenthe and Tessera and the rest are faced with dire choices ... yet I found it hard to care. I had no emotional investment. I could, and did, admire McKillip's artistry, but while that artistry, as always, compelled my respect, it left my heart untouched.

***The Tyrant,*** Michael Cisco, Prime Books, Ohio, 250 pp., hardcover, $29.95, ISBN: 1-894815-85-8.

In the afterword to *The Divinity Student* (winner of the 1999 International Horror Writer's Guild Award for Best First Novel), Michael Cisco wrote of his ambition to craft prose capable of affecting his readers "like a spell, or a poison, or a drug, or hypnosis." In an age where words have lost so much of their sacred and profane power, such an ambition may seem hopelessly naïve or laughably grandiose, yet *The Divinity Student* came close to achieving it. Cisco's new novel, *The Tyrant*, comes even closer.

Cisco is a visionary able to communicate his dark insights into the flimsy constructs we call reality and human nature with nightmarish precision. He is also an intellectual: a Ph.D. in Philosophy whose fiction is as cerebral as it is visceral. Reading his hyperconscious prose, which is beautiful, funny, and—both in subject matter and sheer inventiveness—shocking, it is impossible not to be reminded of another visionary intellectual, William S. Burroughs. Like Burroughs, Cisco turns language against itself, subverting our ordinary experience and expectations of what words are for and how they work. And, again like Burroughs, he tells one hell of a story in the process.

Which is not to say that he doesn't make demands of his readers. His style, which eschews conventional punctuation, is somewhat eccentric and correspondingly difficult to navigate at first, but this difficulty vanishes after a page or two, once the distinctive rhythms of his prose insinuate themselves. Cisco is a writer who teaches you, sentence by sentence, how to read him.

*The Tyrant* is a bizarre, horrific, surreal love story between Ella, a fifteen-year-old prodigy in ectoplasmic research who is afflicted with polio, and a man whose epilepsy like condition, a manifestation of "superabundant vitality, with therefore a corresponding surplus capacity for death," makes him the ideal test subject for an experiment that aims to pierce the veil of death and report back from the other side. The experiment is run by Dr. Belhoria, a woman gifted with the demented sangfroid of a female Dr. Benway. She is assisted by Ella, who acts as amanuensis for doctor and subject alike.

Because of his "surplus capacity," the test subject gains extraordinary powers in the afterworld, powers that make him into the Tyrant of the book's title. Conferring a kind of pseudo-life upon the dead, the Tyrant raises an army and embarks upon a military campaign against the demonic forces of hell, which he conquers in a series of battles that Cisco renders with wit and brio. The Tyrant then storms heaven . . and finally turns to the world of the living. Meanwhile, his physical body is abducted by a trio of supernatural entities led by Judge Daisie, a terrifying embodiment of evil reminiscent of Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's harrowing *Blood Meridian*. Distraught, abandoned by Dr. Belhoria, and only gradually realizing that her obsession with the Tyrant is a sign of love, Ella seeks him out, her journey leads her across a country that, in the ultimate case of the return of the repressed, is steadily being infiltrated by the ghost world of the Tyrant. A grim apocalypse looms.

Cisco's language gains power and vitality as he goes, until plot and character are all but swept away in a flood of inspired imagery and richly detailed fantasy. Some readers may consider this to be a weakness, and in a conventional novel it likely would be evidence of an author losing control, but *The Tyrant* is no more a conventional novel than Cisco is a conventional novelist. He is blazing a trail. There is genius in his pages, and the excitement of genuine discovery. ❧

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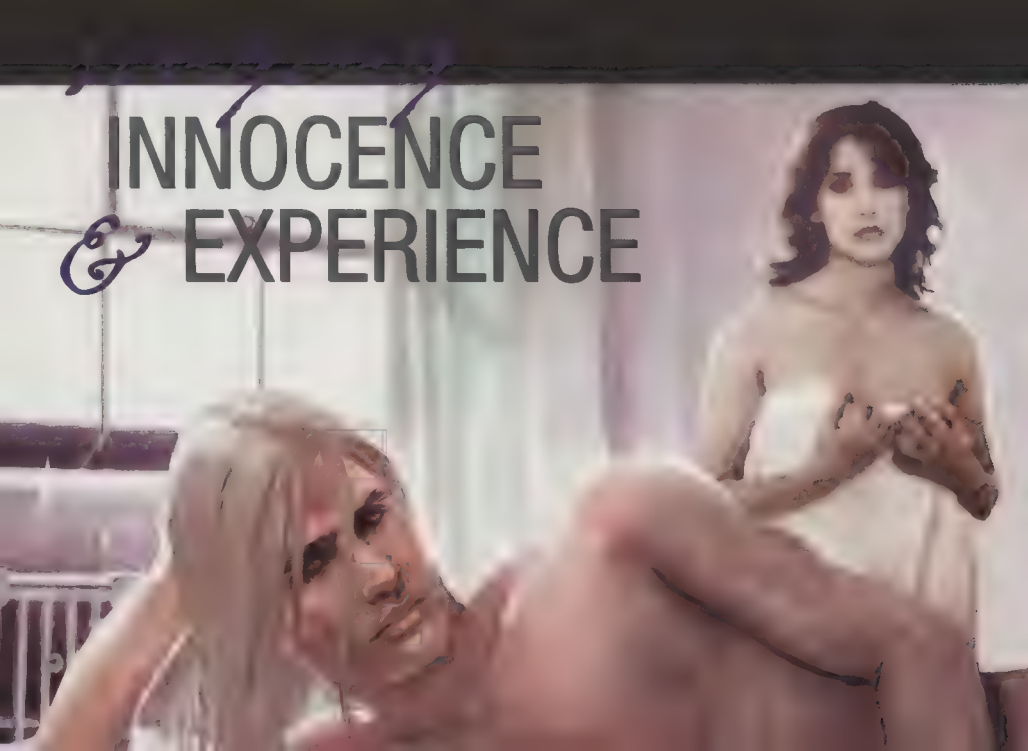
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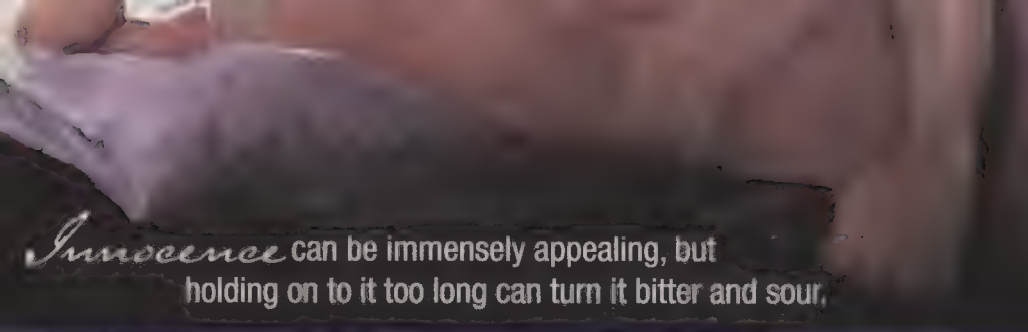


*Innocence* can be immensely appealing, but holding on to it too long can turn it bitter and sour.

He was reading on the bed, naked, chin propped on one fist, [illegible] turned the pages with quick, incurious flicks of his fingers. Morning light rinsed his skin the color of ivory, pale slate where shadows touched him and the same smooth pallor everywhere; even in summer, he never tanned. A fine [illegible] down, like the silk on a nut, traced the length of his spine. He had the look of a dancer or an acrobat; his face held unexpected hollows and angles, the spacing of his eyes, the tilt of his cheekbones, moved almost past exotic into alien. His hair where it spilled over the pillow was whiter than his skin. For some time he had kept it short; now it was growing out and fell constantly into his eyes, silk shag always cool to the touch; he smelled [illegible] a little like sunlight, and a little like snow, and his hair had the tinge of dry violets. Without looking up, he closed his book and lay it on the bedside table, rolled over onto his back and folded his arms behind his head. "[illegible]," he added, and blinked eyes like evening air, "not a nun."

Isabeau Reisse, called Beau and inclined to damage anyone who used her abbreviation, leaned back on her hands and laughed. It still [illegible] [illegible] of her left wrist, she was sitting on the end of her own bed, watching [illegible] unicorn try to seduce her for the third time in a week. "I read once that the unicorn used to represent Christ. Like in the Unicorn tapestries, at the Cloisters, [illegible] purifying the waters with his horn after the snake poisoned them. Also the association with virginity, as Mary was a virgin to whom the Holy Spirit came. [illegible] the unicorn comes only to a virgin. The purest and noblest of living beasts must nuked on my bed." Beau [illegible] that. So much for purity.

The unicorn's [illegible] unsettling. Even his mouth had little color; his teeth were very white. "And when the unicorn lay his head in the virgin's lap, what did you think was happening, there? Freud would have had a field day with the symbolism of the horn and the maiden. You should program [illegible] Daniel keeps telling you, there's more to life than coding."

Her shoulders had flinched [illegible] at his mention of Daniel, [illegible] and any such thing [illegible] ped with you."

The unicorn said practically, "You'll have to sleep somewhere." When he brushed the hair out of his eyes, Beau glimpsed again the stain on his forehead, shapeless, smoky as a fading bruise, the only flaw anywhere on his impossible skin. "You'll be safe enough. The unicorn is also a peaceable beast, as you've no doubt read. Have I hurt you in any way, these past months? I will do nothing that you do not want. More accurately, I can do nothing that you do not want. You touched me; you're virgin; you've read enough for that. When she brings in the hunters, he never runs."

For a moment the color shifted in his eyes, darkening to an indigo even the sunlight could not clear. His beauty had gotten into Beau's throat; it closed her breath, fractured all the bones around her heart. She swallowed an emotion she would not name and said, unevenly, "There are no hunters here. No nets. No spears."

"A walled garden and a pomegranate tree and chains of gold."

Beau did not dare touch him, fresh as sprinkled salt or snow. Beyond the broad window over the bed, crows were fighting in the ash trees. Her backyard opened onto a scanty wood, thin stand of trees and scrub that spread between her block of houses and the town reservoir, the unicorn liked to walk down there, around the perimeter of the water where ducks nested among the cattails and the occasional pair of swans made their home. Birds crowded out of the trees and beat the air about his head. Dogs whined like puppies and yearned after his footsteps, or crouched to the ground until he had gone. In the tapestries, Beau remembered, the unicorn's sprawling horn laid open the stomach of one hound until more fastened on its white, speared shoulders, and brought it down in its own pomegranate-red blood. Even the squirrels quieted momentarily as they passed, the mortal girl and the immortal man. "I'm sorry," Beau murmured. "You're not laying your head in my lap."

"No," said the unicorn, "not yet." He turned over onto his side, unself-conscious, easy in his skin, and began to read again. Beau unknotted her hands, breathed out, and watched the unicorn take no notice as she slid off the bed and went downstairs to make lunch. He had been with her almost half a year now; she did not know how to release him. Rather, she knew how to do it: she did not know how she ever could.

She had found him sleeping on a park bench, among the plane trees where she liked to walk in the evening on her way home from work. Even in April, the streetlights came on early among the trees, and she walked through cross-hatched shadows still dripping rain from that afternoon's showers, she had not thought to find anyone else in the damp, lowering evening. At first glance, she did not even see him. But she smelled, out of nowhere, sunlight, snow, violets, and stopped where she stood, among the rainy grass and branches beaded with electric light, and stared. Perhaps the shape on the bench was human, hunched on its side in sleep. It stirred, raised its head and Beau's breath snagged on sudden panic: the odd scent caught her, calmed her, and she did not run. Old violets, she thought, pressed dry for the keeping in a diary of loves fifty years past. Summer sunlight, rich as sap or honey, that soaked into the bones and eased the muscles, first bitter-metal taste of snow on the wind, stirring the bones of brown leaves, wakening winter; violets again, preserved, brittle, like a memory treasured so long its origin had become unimportant. Curious now, unable not to look, Beau opened her eyes and discovered—unreal, unmistakable—the unicorn.

She did not see the lion's tail, the cloven hooves, the beard and mane, the seashell helix of the horn. She saw a slight, hard man, not much above her own height, kneeling on an ancient bench with one hand still along its back to steady himself as he came upright: startled, composed, resigned. In the streetlight's sodium flare, his hair reflected bruised orange, burnt neon; his brows were as pale as his hair, his lashes, or perhaps a faint shade of silver darker than both. His eyes were the color of the air between dusk and winter twilight.

"Oh," Beau said. The sound slipped from her and she did not call it back. "Oh, you're beautiful."

The unicorn lifted his head: it was not a human movement, and it did not look wrong on him. "You," he whispered, "I felt you. The hunts close, isn't it? You never come alone."

She lost language in the color of his eyes, shook her head dumbly before she remembered how to say, "No. Just me."

"Then," said the unicorn, "you are the hunt."

A wind came out of the western half of the sky and shivered rain down from the young leaves, the branches blackened with damp, onto Beau's shoulders and the unicorn's light dyed hair. Neither noticed.

She said then, "Let me touch you." Afterward she squirmed at the memory of that breathy, breathless plea: high-school wallflower begging for a dance, a date, for the bare brief regard that passed over her and passed on. Beau had never been shy, or overlooked, or needed from anyone what she could not get herself. Twenty-six years old, she heard herself pleading and despised it; but the color of the unicorn's eyes, his skin, his ragged shadow that might be changing shape at the farthest corner of her vision, when she was not looking, loosened her throat and she spoke without thinking. "Just once."

"Never once."

"I won't hurt you."

"You don't know how," said the unicorn. A slight smile changed all the lines of his face, so that Beau caught her breath and almost laughed for delight. The smile left him and he bent his head, dipping his horn into the poisoned stream; his movements had nothing to do with her. "You can't know."

"I know," Beau said, and did not know whether she was agreeing or arguing. "I know." Gently, she reached out to him through the damp April evening and laid her hand on his forehead.

Beneath her palm, a faint pulse ticked between their skins. It might only have been the blood beating in her hand that slipped a little against his brow, but warmth came and went with the rhythm, steady as sunlight, as though she held the afternoon like amber under her hand. It neither sped nor slowed as he breathed. He did not move at her touch. But he allowed it, he did not pull away, he could not, her touch fixed him fast to the park bench beneath the buzzing streetlight, to her. She had no need for a golden bridle, a chain of gems around his throat, nothing but her hand and her desire and the sorcery of inexperience. She knew what she did without knowing how. It was not quite innocence; it was close enough.

Her fingers were beginning to prickle, pins-and-needles waking, as though the sun-glow out of his forehead had gotten into her bones and her blood was bristling with light. Beneath her spread hand, his twilight eyes watched her without blinking, without judgment, without yielding. "You're very beautiful," Beau whispered, helplessly.

The unicorn rose, and followed her home.

He never changed shape. Perhaps Beau's first blurred impression had caught him into this form, or some truth in a spiral of story made him as real a beautiful man as a mythical beast, and he never answered questions she left unasked. While she typed, he read; sometimes he cooked dinner, a better cook than Beau and gracious enough that she rarely felt insulted when he leaned over her shoulder and commented on her choices, and often went walking with her on weekends or odd free afternoons. He discussed poetry. He told stories. He tossed around odd bits of philosophy, never

struck between the teeth, the eyes were bottomless wells

unkindly, and monopolized the remote control when they watched television. At night he slept on the futon in her living room, and she often woke with her alarm to find him already awake and reading by the thin light before dawn

That no one else on her block noticed he was a unicorn—though she could not imagine what they would have said, had it happened—gradually drew further from her thoughts, as nobody seemed to notice the white haired man who was living with Beau Reisse anyway. Other pedestrians greeted them when they wandered together beneath the plane trees, at the supermarket, the check out clerk nodded to the unicorn and handed him a paper bag full of French bread, tuna fish, carrots, and organic fruit juices; none of Beau's neighbors asked her about the beautiful stranger, or cared to consider him when he was not there before their eyes. Perhaps, she thought, they did not see him. Or perhaps they saw him as something other than he was, less evocative, more explicable. Why she had seen him, then, she did not know. She did not think about it much; she did not really want an answer. "Innocence," the unicorn said once, a non sequitur to something she had asked him, idly, about his life before he came to the park and the plane trees. "We're drawn to it. Youths and maidens, the unknowing, the untouched, who are beautiful because they do not know they are beautiful . . . Here and there Beau. Around and about. We never go twice where we've been once. Does that answer your question?" It did not, quite, and at the same time answered the ones she did not touch. Now she stood beside the sink that dripped only at night, hands flat on the surface of the counter, feeling her blood rise at the thought of touching his forehead as she had only that once beneath the plane trees. *You know you want it.* She turned angrily and jerked open the refrigerator door, listening to the sound of pages turning in the bedroom, refusing to hear him.

She put together sandwiches, vegetarian for the unicorn and turkey for herself, hands moving without thinking about it. When she glanced into the bedroom, he had not moved from his statue's effortless pose. To Beau's eye, something between smugness and a dare polished his immobility. Let him come for his own lunch, then: she left the plate on the kitchen table and wandered into the living room, sandwich in hand, to settle cross-legged on the abandoned futon and wish there was somewhere else she could go. A hotel was ridiculous. If she spent more than one night at the office, people would begin to ask questions. As for Daniel— She entertained two and a half seconds' thought of calling him before she remembered that he would probably spend half of their stopgap, stunted conversation dropping the receiver or losing track of whatever he had been working on when she called. Besides, she did not even know he was home. He kept even odder hours than she did. He would have reverted, gone tongue-tied again or fallen back on trivia; and more than that, Beau had no idea what she would say to him.

Daniel Carter had come into her life perhaps a month after the unicorn and much less spectacularly, a graceless, shock-headed young man with the most beautiful eyes Beau had ever seen. Maybe they balanced everything else about him. He dropped coffee mugs. He tripped over sidewalk curbs. He spoke as though he feared his words might be taken away from him at any second. But his eyes were the color of burnt gold, champagne-translucent in direct light, and he could not keep them off her, she wanted to tell him to get a haircut, and then she wanted to talk to him, for no discernible reason except that her face slid into a smile when he called her name in the hallway, and he had once handed her a paper cup of water after a four hour coding stint, before she even remembered how to open her mouth. For reasons that she did not name to herself, she did not speak of him to the unicorn until almost three months had passed.

One afternoon, he put out his hand and did not knock Beau's elbow into the keyboard or spill a stack of papers to the floor; he was holding a book, a paperback volume of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, and asking her whether she had ever read the *Duino Elegies*. Beau had not; she borrowed the book and surprised herself three days later by asking about Rilke's other works, as much for the language as for Daniel's delighted golden eyes. He gave her the *Book of Hours* and two hours of his own at a local Indian restaurant. Afterward, he walked her to the bus stop; he was not her first kiss, but she thought him her best, and told him so. They had Japanese food the next week, and the week after that Beau confessed that she had run out of restaurants to recommend and they ate competent stir fry in Daniel's disastrous clutter of an apartment. The week after that, Daniel stumbled on the stairs and all but flung an assortment of flowers into her arms, and though she did not know how she would explain the unicorn—*We're just friends really* ?—Beau invited him home for the evening.

In the end, she did not explain the unicorn at all. He greeted them at the door, Yeats in hand, did not embarrass Daniel by extolling Beau's virtues as a housemate, as she had feared, and then retired to the porch. Whatever he was doing—waving away moths in the lingering summer air, Beau suspected, and reading—it was out of sight. She had apologized to him more than once, about inviting Daniel over without warning him. He had grinned at her outright, looking up from a translation of Rumi, and told her not to worry. "Do I look offended? You're the maiden; you can bring home whatever knight you like. Besides, he has good taste in poetry. Just tell me whether you're going out for dinner or eating in: if you go out, I'm eating the Chinese leftovers." Presumably he did as he had said; when they returned from a Sicilian restaurant Daniel had hunted down in the phonebook, Beau did not bother to look in the refrigerator and Daniel did not care to remind her. Beneath her palm, his hair felt exactly as wildly springing as it looked, when she reached for his hands, she was surprised at how strongly he gripped her fingers, almost enough to hurt, more than enough to make her smile for nonsensical reasons more beautiful even than Daniel's eyes. He was watching her as though he had a question stuck between his teeth, his eyes were buttered amber in the lamplight. She was trying to think of how she might suggest Daniel's own apartment to him without making either of them blush or crack up laughing, because she could not imagine inviting him upstairs while the unicorn placidly read through that week's library haul on the porch, when she looked past Daniel's shoulder and through the sliding glass door to see the unicorn moonlit and smirking over the pages of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. She whispered, "Daniel?" Kindly and carefully, with much more regret than she let him see, she pointed him to the door with her phone number scrawled on half a notecard and an open offer for lunch. She closed the door behind him before starting to swear.

"How could you?" she demanded, when she had run out of immediate expletives. "As soon as I fuck him, you're free, is that it? For God's sake, you're not even subtle! Just push us into bed, why don't you? Here, you can stand outside the doorway and make sure we do the job right. Want to listen? Just don't come in—we're busy. Jesus! What kind of unicorn are you?"

She had flung the door open so violently it rattled in its frame and she spared a brief moment from her fury to wonder whether she would finish her evening picking splinters bloody-fingered out of the carpet, it might have been fitting, the unicorn had never moved. Now he finished the fifteenth sonnet, closed the book with one finger between the pages to mark the place, and asked, "Do you know what happened to the maiden who snared the unicorn?"

"I don't know," Beau said sourly, "you tried to get her into bed?"

"She was wed, yes. Usually to one of the huntsmen, if she was not the lord's daughter, or the daughter of a king: thus breaking her binding over the unicorn. Do you think I'm joking? Innocence is powerful stuff. Even physical innocence. A little learning may be a dangerous thing, but not knowing can be far more dangerous. You can hurt me far worse than any hunter with a lance or a gun. You know that, and you don't." The unicorn rubbed at his eyes, a startlingly human gesture. "I'm tired, Isabeau. Go see Daniel tomorrow. Apologize to him. He didn't deserve to be thrown out after such a nice evening; he didn't even spill coffee down your shoes, and that's a great credit to his love." When she came out of the shower, he was finishing the *Sonnets* on the futon.

They did not speak for almost two days. Daniel mumbled an almost inaudible good-morning and all but shied from her as she passed him in the corridor, on her way to make herself some chai; staring after him, Beau drank three swallows before she realized it was only hot water. He was typing when she returned, easy fingered for once, she reached forward to touch his shoulder and curled her fingers back in memory of the unicorn's beauty. Daniel's courtesy, a night spent wakeful and furious and alone while the unicorn read Rilke downstairs. Instead she finished her work in silence and returned home to find that the unicorn was more inventive than she had thought.

The first time she saw him naked, her blood almost stopped. He lay on his side, weight on one folded arm; it was afternoon and the light gilded his skin that she had never seen beyond his hands and his face, sleek as marble to the eye, vulnerable, luring. Just the way his hair parted over his eyes, a careless snowfall with twilight looking through it, made her want to touch him. She would have knelt beside him, crushed pomegranates against his pale mouth and eaten the seeds from his lips, combed his hair with her fingers, and laid her hand against his throat, like a maiden picked out of fifteenth century threads: there were no hunters. he was not the prey. Beau blinked and felt herself smiling in surprise, shifting her weight to step toward him.

She closed her hands tight against her sides, and made herself see the scene as it was, the beautiful white-haired man lounging on her bed, expecting her to melt into his arms, never in love with her and most likely scornful of any clumsy attempt she might make in his direction. a recourse, an artifice, a last resort. She tried to imagine Daniel doing the same thing. The antidote worked, she began to snicker, and lost the laughter with a sinking sickness when she remembered that Daniel might never enter her house again. The unicorn lifted both silver brows and asked, "Is something wrong?"

What you're not wearing. Her voice swayed only a little. "You're a unicorn."

"Which means, I suppose, that I should not look as I do. Unicorns possess the cloven feet of goats, the tails of lions, and the horns of narwhals, which few people had seen at the time of this description's invention. Everyone knows that."

"Get off my bed!" Beau shouted. Her voice split, out of anger or hilarity, she was still not sure which. "I'm not losing my virginity to a mythical creature. God, this is starting to get on my nerves."

"Imagine," said the unicorn, "how I feel." He left the room on noiseless feet; she found him half an hour later, still stark naked, peeling an orange on the back steps. Beau cursed him and burst out laughing. The unicorn grinned at her, offered her a piece of orange, and came inside. At dinner, she could not have told from his manner that anything had happened; he was clothed, friendly, reserved, unreactable as ever. The smell of lost summers' violets drifted on her pillow as she fell asleep.

Three times he had tried to seduce her now, if this blatant, ridiculous dare could be called seduction, and three times Beau had ignored him. In a folktale, she thought, that might have freed her. Instead the unicorn remained in her house, chained by a breathed word and his forehead burning against her palm, she had not spoken to Daniel in more than a week, except when one bumped past the other in a hallway or close corner and muttered *excuse me*. Beau crumbled the crust of a turkey sandwich between her fingers and thumped one fist into the futon. Faint from a flight of stairs away, the sound of turning pages scratched the air. When she called Daniel, at last and awkwardly, she clenched her teeth hard on the sound of his voice, fumbling over the worst voicemail message in the world. "Hi. It's me . . ." and after almost fifteen seconds of painful silence, "leave a message?" Beau's words lay in her mouth like stone that her teeth bit into; she could not say any of them. She hung up, and went upstairs to find the unicorn.

He must have come downstairs for his sandwich while she was clinging speechless to the phone, because he was picking beansprouts off the plate when she opened the door. He had put on a bathrobe—hers, faded blue terrycloth cut at the elbows—and settled back against the bed's headboard, legs curled beneath him, looking like a sculpture any way he moved. "Hey," Beau said, and could not go any further. "Hey." Her voice stuck, like Daniel on his answering machine, and she leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed tight over her chest as though she might slip away.

The unicorn put down the plate, raised his head in the gesture she had seen first by smoky sodium light. His face was turned away. His untrimmed hair fanned forward and screened his profile from her; he spoke without expression. "Once, in the thirteenth century, I spent a winter in the company of a monk. He was a good man, I think, he was kind to me, even at the beginning when he thought I was only one of God's fools, a white-haired lunatic wandering barefoot in the snow. and when he learned what I was, he neither revered nor feared me. He passed me some honey to put on the bread we had been eating, saved from the summer's store, before thinking to ask what unicorns eat. He wanted to know if I had a soul. I could not answer him. But I stayed in his hermit's cell all that winter—and it was a bitter year, people dying of plague and cold, and though I healed whom I could, I could never heal enough—and he did not care whether I went on two feet or four. nomed or naked he did not ask whether I was his or the world's. In the spring, I left. Nothing bound me there. Even the monk's celibacy was not a chain on me, he had not touched me as you had, to possess, as innocence reaches out without knowing what it is taking and holds without knowing what it has. He knew. For all his religion, he knew. And he did not touch me as though I had been born only for his hand, his eyes, his wonder. Do you think I am beautiful, Isabeau Reisse?" His voice broke over the name. "Then take what you desire, though you'll tell me you don't, and set me free. Never mind the last tapestry. I am not made to be kept."

Beau's blood pounded out all thought. "I don't believe this. You I do not believe this. Are you listening to yourself?" She had never been angry with the unicorn before. Exasperated, irritated, bewildered, yes: never this slow weight of rage moving in her bones, jolting her blood until she opened her mouth and she did not recognize the words she was saying. Even over Daniel, she had never been so furious. "Is that all you think innocence is? Wanting with out understanding, blind self-assurance, the confidence of the foolhardy—you think the innocent are stupid, is that it?"

"What you do not understand," the unicorn whispered, face turned from her like a door slammed into stone, "makes you dangerous."

Then explain it to me! You, who don't even know what you're talking about -- Because I don't know what something is like, that means I don't understand it's different, right? Because I haven't been you inside your skin every moment of your life. I can't reach out my hand and hope you'll take it? Fine, I'm a virgin. I've never fucked anyone—that's all the innocence there is, sure, that's all that matters. I'm not worldly. But there's a world out there. You think I don't know?

The unicorn shouted, bugle of trumpets and the horn swinging up white as lightning, "You *don't* know!

The air burned. Into its concussion, the blasted silence where a pale man sat stiff as iron in a worn-out bathrobe and a virgin's touch blazed on his forehead like a scar. Beau began to laugh.

"Oh, Mother of God on a motorcycle." She shook, tearless, hands to her eyes, bent double with the impossibility of it. "I've met a cynical unicorn.

The unicorn shuddered. His eyes had closed like bruises in his salt-white face, he reached forward and picked a piece of shattered plate off the quilt, turned it between his fingers blankly, as though he could not quite recall what it was or how he had come to hold it in his hand. He whispered, "Half a year, Beau. Autumn's rising, and still you hold on to me. I waited for the hunters. Only you. You, and that boy who strings you poetry—what do you want both of us for? Me at your beck and call, and him to prove that you're worth having: he has to come of his own accord. The lady and her knight go walking in the garden, and the pomegranate seeds fall down like tears. Break one and bite one, Isabeau. Let me go."

Beau had stopped laughing. "I've eaten pomegranates before. They're a symbol. Virginity's a symbol. I don't hold you here."

"Then who does?" He turned his face to her, bitterly. His eyes were the color of ice after the sun has set, has hair stung white as a plague winter. "Virgin. Innocent. Who else chained me that night?"

Beau said, so quietly it hurt her, "Six months." She shivered in the warm fall of late morning sunlight, early September feeling her way through memory toward the unicorn's rigid, wintry figure. "Did you hate me then, too?"

I don't hate you. Unicorns come in adoration, to lay their horns in their ladies' laps—"

Stop that!" He blinked, more than slightly jolted: a crack in winter's face. "The only thing worse than a cynical unicorn is a passive-aggressive one. If I were a mythologist, I could make my reputation with this. When I touched you, in the park. You didn't flinch from me. You didn't run."

"The hunt had run me down."

No hunt." If he had a name, she could have touched him with it, he did not, or she did not know it, and it might have come too close to whatever trembled beneath the boundaries of his skin. When she rested her weight on the edge of the bed, he did not move away. She did not know if that was a good sign. "Just me, like you said."

The virgin.

Another virgin. I want to think they didn't all hurt you. Maybe the rest had hunters following them to round the story out. I don't know, you could tell me. But I remember you said this. *We never go twice where we've been once,* so once you go, you stay gone, a memory, a myth, something to turn over in your thoughts at night and tell to your children's children until maybe you doubt that it ever happened to you, a unicorn glimpsed and touched once long ago when the world was young. I believe you. I believe that you stayed all winter with a celibate monk, maybe a virgin if he'd been raised in the order, and I believe that you left him in the spring. I believe that you want to get away from me. I want you to believe that. I want to release you." Her breath burned in her throat. "I didn't know. That you were hurting. That I was hurting you. I didn't know that I was keeping you here, I thought you stayed for your own reasons, the way Daniel—the way you talk to someone you like, ordinarily, with no chain or binding, just people. You were kind to me . . . I didn't know. That's ignorance, not innocence. And I am sorry."

She saw the movement of the muscles in his throat as he swallowed hard, terrible in its beauty and how natural it looked on a unicorn, whose movements were not human. The broken bit of pottery dropped from his fingers, clinked against the other fragments. He should have gone from her house long ago. "You can't know what it's like."

"I know," Beau whispered. "I don't. I never can. But you—" She turned up her hands, palms and fingers empty and open. "You can't either. But we hold out our hands anyway."

The unicorn's gaze sank and darkened. He dropped his face, and Beau began to rise, turn away, leave him to his walled garden and the pomegranate trees whose fruit she had picked though he never saw it, his hand on her wrist stopped her. He drew her back down with little more than the warmth of palm and fingers, almost casual, unexpected, opening something inside her bones where his nakedness had fired her, his touch was very light. "I am holding on to you," he said. The words were ritual as the lowering of his head. "Loose me."

In dreams, shameful smudges of imagery and tactile imagination that she woke and tried earnestly to forget, she had felt her mouth pressed against his pale mouth that would taste like snow, and sunlight, and violets, she had slid her hands through his hair, and drawn the snowy strands between her lips, and felt the breath-heat of his lashes against her cheek. Now her hands shook as she set them to either side of his face, cupped over the tilted cheekbones until her fingertips rested at the outer corners of his eyes and his growing hair slipped over her fingers as fine and cool as she had imagined it. His eyes had closed as she bent her face to his, she tasted dry violets as she set her lips to his forehead, where her touch or a horn's conspicuous absence had smudged the skin where sunlight beat out of him to the rhythm of their moving blood no more than a brief brush of their skins it burned her. The unicorn said, "Isabeau."

She held falling snow, rising light, flowers growing in a garden whose door swung open to the wind. An uncoiled spiral, whorled and shining as the inner curve of a mussel shell, wheeled and glanced over her shoulder, a slight-boned, compact man little taller than corn haired Isabeau Reisse raised his face to hers, like a child. She held something from a young world, to remember at night and retell. Quietly she straightened the empty quilt, and leaned forward to pick up the pieces of the broken plate.

In the lightening silence, something beeped downstairs, waited forty five seconds, beeped again. Beau hit the play button with her knuckles as she crossed the kitchen floor in champagne-colored sunlight, hands full of white shards.

On the answering machine, a message from Daniel was waiting. ❧

*Again and again, although we know love's landscape*
*and the little churchyard with its mourning names*
*and the terrible secretive routine in which the others*
*end: again and again, we two go out*
*under the ancient trees, again and again we set ourselves*
*among the flowers, opposite the sky.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, "Immer wieder"

What's the difference between us and them?
Is it finesse with a sword? Courage in the face of danger?
Or is it something deeper and older than that?

# tiny bells

by Bruce Holland Rogers
Illustration by Laurie Harden

SLEEPER, SLEEP WELL. Sleep until morning. And listen.

I am a dream. Once I was a man. Once I dreamed as you now dream, woke as you will awaken. I used to walk the world between earth and sky. Now I am a memory. If you wake to memories of a life you never lived, it is because you have let me enter your dreams. Threads of my life will be woven with your own.

Sleeper, I bring you a story. In the time of the Empire, the people of my village lived simply. We were happy. In our valley, we were at peace. The Emperor's armies were vast and we were his people.

People in the village of the next valley over were happy too, as far as we could tell. Like us, they tended their flocks, sheared and traded wool. Like us, they planted wheat, ground flour, baked bread. For their feasts, they too roasted mutton.

But instead of proper houses, they built round huts, like mounds of stone. Instead of putting icons on their walls, they hung cut branches over their doors. The men tied bands of blue cloth on their heads, and the women wore metal bells on their wrists. They feasted much as we did on holy days, but for them, different days were holy.

We rarely met. From our farthest pastures, we saw them in their own farthest fields. In springtime, we sometimes passed them on the road to the market. When they spoke, we understood them, though some of their words were strange.

We had been separate like that for generations. We might have gone on, separate, for generations more if the Emperor and his army had not come to our mountains on their way to conquer the east. But come they did. More men than we had ever seen, men with swords and banners, camped on our hillsides. Their horses outnumbered our sheep. We saw the Emperor's square, black tent in the distance. His general came among us, commanding the soldiers to carry off our biggest rams, to empty the fullest granaries. "Do not be afraid," he told us. "You are the Emperor's own people. We will leave enough to sustain you."

With the next dawn, the army was on the march again, over the pass into the next valley. At first, we did not think of the people there. We thought of the hard winter ahead, of the smaller harvest of wool for spring.

When we saw a great smoke, we knew from what distant fires it was rising. Then we did think of the other village. We remembered the general's words. "You are the Emperor's own people." When we took our flocks to our most distant pastures, we saw no other flocks, no other herders. I went into their valley. I saw the ruins of their round houses, the ashes of their granaries. Of the people themselves, there was no sign.

As the days grew short, though, those people came to us in dreams. My widowed mother dreamed of a woman her own age who was a widow also. My daughter dreamed of a little girl who wore bells on her wrists. In my own dreams I met a man whose favorite ram was black, like my own. In our dreams they said to us, "We are lost. We were driven from our homes and from this world. We are a memory only. Give us refuge. Give us a place here in your dreams."

*Continued on page 84*

# STALKING THE LEOPARD

By Tanith Lee
Illustration by John Berkey

**WHERE ALL ELSE HAS LOST IT'S GLITTER, THERE REMAINS ONE MYSTERY TO EXPLORE.**

Aviy leaned her slim, white arms on the balustrade, the sequins on her sleeves dripping along the stone. She was young, beautiful, and rich, and she lived in one of the most picturesque cities of northern Cumes, Dophias [illegible] known as The Arch.

Soon it up after dark, its [illegible] against the black sky. More subtly, its rays painted the parks, tree-hung boulevards, and mansions below, including Aviy's [illegible], and her fashionably short black hair.

How bored she was, this elegant young [illegible]. Nothing engaged her interest. Aviy had known only [illegible] and glamorously stimulating things all her twenty years. By now even the rainbow itself, at which tourists would stand gaping both on the ground and [illegible], become, for her, samey.

One of these vehicles, [illegible] Aviy saw, with slight affront, that it was the private car of her most recent ex-lover. They had parted amicably [illegible] Aviy's wish—perhaps for that very reason she did not [illegible]

"Avly! Glimmering creature. Do get in, we're late"

Avly got into the car and sank back on the cushioned seat. A glass of champagnist alighted in her hand. She sipped and glanced sidelong at her handsome ex, who wore a silk cloak.

Whatever had she seen in him? But oh, what had she seen, ever, in *any* of her several lovers?

The driverless car whirled them through the sky, under The Arch, deftly and automatically avoiding other similar traffic, most of it intent on pleasure

They landed on the roof of a brightly lamped mansion. Massive trees grew from stems of water set into concrete. Polished diamonds winked in tiles. Fortunately, another woman came at once and claimed Avly's cast-off. Now Avly stood again, bored and lethargic, at one more balustrade, staring across into the shining apartments over the way where similar parties raged. Was there anything interesting there? No. Everything might as well be a mirror, including this roof-garden.

"Oh look! Look at that—down in the Violet Quarter!"

The quarters of the city were named for the colors of The Arch, but Violet, like Indigo and Orange, was one of the poorer, shabbier areas.

Partygoers poured in a tide across the garden, and Avly went indifferently after them, not expecting to see very much. However, from the north side of the roof, she and everyone else soon stared in awe at a distant but colossal column of smoke and fire.

"Several of the old houses on Velvet Street must be burning."

"Let's go and see."

Accidents and disasters were rare in Dophan. The last vehicular crash had happened before Avly was born, the last fire when she was ten—and she had been interested then. But now this ghoulishness irritated her, and she wanted to decline the offer of the two nearest guests, who were already guiding her into the flow of people hurrying back toward the vehiclepark.

"Avly, come *on*. What a spectacle it must be—you can't *miss* it—and the horror—perhaps there are several dead!"

Ennui, distaste even, strangely, decided Avly on nonresistance. She allowed them to pull her into the car, and moments later they were zooming north across the city. From many buildings around, countless others did the same.

What would she feel? Alarm, sympathy—fear . . . Would she feel *anything*? People, as a rule, no longer seemed quite real to Avly, that was, when she thought of them in any depth.

The fire, though, was impressive. It towered into, and presently dominated, the sky. Black and purple smoke, sequined by embers and sparks, plumed two blocks of flaming masonry. Even as the car settled on an adjacent landing pad, one of the houses collapsed with a roar, and a mixed swarm of darks and lights shot upward.

All around, sightseers were piling out of their transports, carrying Avly with them, helpless and contemptuous. Shouting and laughing, the crowd struggled to approach as close as possible to the safety barriers already erected in the street. No firefighters or medical vehicles seemed in evidence, only a street marshal stood by with some twenty of his men. They were there simply to maintain order.

Another house collapsed.

"They don't bother with them now, you know," someone said. "These poorer streets can't afford any insurance."

Avly found herself pressed to the high, transparent, fire-resistant barrier. No smoke stung her eyes or ash stained her frock. Like everyone else, she gazed fixedly into the heart of the fire.

Was it only beautiful? Or only terrible?

Had anyone survived?

Startling her, at that very moment Avly saw a tall figure emerge from the crimson hell.

She was astounded. He was dressed darkly, and his long, fashionable cloak flared away from him like a single black wing. His hair was also long and black, yet from this distance, through the slight distortion of the barrier and the unfelt ripples of heat, she could not make out his features, save for a dark bar of brows, eyes—

He strode from the conflagration—*untouched*. How was that possible? All around him, the cascading flames—sparks swirling through his hair, the wild wing of the cloak brushing against a crumbling mass of brickwork and fire. Was he wearing some extreme of protective clothing? He did not look like either a firefighter or a medic. Down the charred tumble of the steps he walked, with unhikely ease, into the street.

Without a backward glance, he strode away.

"That man," said Avly.

The woman beside her remarked, "Yes, I thought I saw somebody too—a survivor, perhaps. I couldn't be sure. Where is he now?"

Avly stared. She could no longer see the man who had walked out of the fire. He must have entered the crowd, been lost there among the many other young, tall men with long hair and cloaks.

The woman said to Avly, "An optical illusion, actually. I now think. Have you ever seen a fire before? Illusions can happen. I wasn't sure, myself, if I really saw anyone."

Avly was sure that she herself had.

Just then all the remaining buildings gave way together. A golden bombshell of curdled fire hit the sky, then the black dust started drifting, even finally across the tops of the barriers. Careful of its garments, the crowd began to disperse.

**DURING THE NIGHT** Avly had a recurring dream. It was of the man who had strode out of the fire. In the dream she had detached herself from the crowd, and now walked after him, taking some care not to be seen, and so keeping to the shadows beyond the street-lamps. Always he stalked some eleven or twelve meters ahead of her. Following, pursuing him with stealth and tenacity, Avly experienced a continual frisson of excitement.

Never, since earliest childhood, had she felt such a thing. She had forgotten until now what excitement felt like. Besides, there was another element, beyond anything childish. It was, she realized on waking, both romantic and sexual.

What was happening? Really she did not mind what it was. It had been—quite amazing. Was it still? Yes. She tried, accordingly, to return to sleep to continue the pursuit and the emotion it entailed. But now sleep eluded her.

She spent all day, as usual, in the most unimportant, superficial activities. Lying down at midnight, which was very early for her, she waited, tingling at the chance of dreams. But that night she dreamed of nothing. Nothing at all.

Avly was in a store that was hung with crystals, strolling about with two acquaintances. A fountain played unwetly over all. Avly was *not* bored.

The moment she had left her apartment she had begun to look out for him, the man from the fire. It was ridiculous really, and made her inwardly laugh—something too that recently had seldom occurred. How could she ever hope to locate one man, unnamed, unknown, amid the teeming sprawl of Dophan? All she could assume was that he was fully rich, even though he had stepped from the fire in run-down Velvet Street. His clothes, his hair, his demeanor had conveyed complete assurance and security—therefore, wealth. Avly had not lived among them for twenty years without coming to recognize her own clan. Although, if anything, the stranger was more princely than any man of Avly's class, more arrogant.

A doll of the store, in the form of a tawny lion-beast, trotted over and presented the tray of perfumes, wines, and stimulants resting on its back. Each woman plucked something up. The air filled with scent and bubbles.

But Avly's eyes slid to the edges of all the rooms, trying to find the man. After the three women had been through the ten stories of the store, and she had looked everywhere in it ("But, Avly, whatever are you *looking* for?"—unanswered), she was eager to go back outside. Once there, she quickly sloughed her companions and began to patrol the boulevards alone. It was midafternoon, the sunlight brilliant and The Arch rainbowing down the most succulent mixed tones

of color on pavements and burnished trees. Avly looked everywhere but pavements, trees, and sky.

Nevertheless, she did not see the man at all. Not even anyone who resembled him. It had been, perhaps, foolish to suppose that he would simply arrive in her vicinity. No, she must take the initiative and mount a proper search.

What did she have to go on? Frankly, only one thing—that, since he was rich, he must live either in the Yellow, Green, or Blue Quarters to the west of the city. Maybe he had been sightseeing in Violet on the night of the fire.

If only she knew something else about him, or better still, possessed something personal of his—for those who could pay, a DNA register was also available. But she lacked either clue.

A minute's intense disappointment flooded Avly. This in turn interested her, however. Was she—was she "in love"? But she had been in love with many men, a few women too. It had never felt like this—this desperate electric *hunger* this excitement and anxiety.

Avly summoned one of the individual public air-cars. As it swooped toward her a silvery shiver ran up her spine. She swiftly got into the car and ordered it to fly her to the Green Quarter.

**BETWEEN THE GLAMOROUS GREENSTONE MANSIONS,** Avly wended her way and never saw her quarry. Here and there in begilttered bars and stores, she paused to make conversation with groups of her peers. Into each brief chat she inserted leading questions. She had heard, she said, from one of her friends, that an eccentric man from this quarter liked to play the tourist in the rundown areas of the city. But everyone she spoke to looked at her in bewilderment. They had heard of nobody like that. What would be the point of visiting such slums anyway? "Oh, during the fire in Violet," supplied Avly vaguely. "My friend thought she saw him there." "But," they replied, slightly thrown, "almost all of us *were*. After all that *fire* was something worth seeing. Did you know," they added, "there were nineteen dead?"

As evening fell, Avly caught another individual public flyer. She rode south again, over into Yellow.

She was growing tired, not exactly physically, but in a slow interval way. She was thinking now she would never find him, and so she believed she *must*. For yes, she *was* in love. And love gave her the *right* to find him. Even so, hers was a difficult task, almost like those set lovers in ancient legends and stories.

The car alighted by one of the great parks of Yellow. Avly walked along dusk avenues between lemon trees, across lawns bordered by giant primroses and saffrons.

A scatter of other pedestrians passed her. Now she asked no one anything. None of them was him.

Leaving the park at a wide gateway, Avly took a road lined by mansions of cream stucco. Already the delicate street-lamps were burning upon their stems, and windows warmed. All this seemed abruptly sad to Avly. Her eyes filled with tears, and deep, deep within herself she felt a fiery joy at her newly minted depression.

Then—*then*—she saw him.

She froze to marble, there beneath a lamp standard, its illumination full upon her.

He was on the same side of the paved sidewalk, approaching her, the long cloak swinging as he strode. She saw his face properly because, one after another, the street lamps described it. It was a patrician, pale, terrible face—terrible that was in its flawless ordinariness. Was he handsome? Ugly? Avly could not be sure. His eyebrows were very black, the eyes too seemed black. His hair and clothes were black also, as she recalled from the last time. He was gloved.

While he approached swiftly, drawing nearer and nearer to her, Avly shrank away, as if from too fierce a glare of light. But he glanced once at her, just as he reached her. Glanced once, and then away, striding on along the street.

Avly shriveled from the seemingly amused contempt of this one brief look. And reveled peculiarly in the comfortless thrill. There had, besides, been more to his glance, she thought. For such disdain seemed to come from foreknowledge. As if he *knew* her and so could discount her entirely. And of course he did not and could not know her. Thus it was for her to change his mind. It seemed to her weirdly stranded, moth-like under the lamp, that his very dismissal had been an *invitation*. So, it said, make me aware of you, make me take an interest in you. Show me something I have never seen in any other, for I too am bored here.

Avly drew in her breath. She crept silently back from the lamps and in among the trees of the street. Once concealed in their shadows, she followed after the man.

Unlike her dreams, however, there was no need to go far. In less than three more minutes, he turned and mounted a long flight of steps. Above, a door opened for him, and he passed into the house.

Shattered by her success, Avly leaned back against a tree. This then, most probably, was where he lived, his apartment.

She gazed up the length of the building. Amid the carvings and cornices, all the windows beamed with light. Which were his? The house was too high for her to be sure if the faint occasional traces of movement she saw cross the windows were, any of them, his. After a space of time, she went up the steps herself and keyed the panel by the door for the names of those who resided there. Having mechanically glimpsed her status in the city, the panel gave them up to her. But, of course, of all the twenty-seven people living, in couples, trios, or singly, in the mansion, only ten of them male, none had a name she knew or could know to be his.

Impatient, curbing urgency, Avly withdrew to the watchpost of her tree.

The night was young as she herself, so inevitably in party-prone Dophan, he would next come out again—either that or he would be sponsoring some festivity of his own in the house. Might she, if enough persons attended this, add herself independently to the guest list?

At the idea her head spun. Laughter welled in her mind and throat. *I am happy! How bizarre.*

But, too, now wonderful the street: the lamps, the stars far above beyond the rainbow. *His* street, lamps, stars. That she had located him so quickly was certainly destiny.

An hour went by. Avly took off her high-heeled shoes and stood barefoot. Then she sat down under the tree, as sluts and waifs did in the rough quarters of Dophan. Avly did not care.

HE AND SHE. DESTINY COMBINED THEM. AVLY KNEW THIS AS ABSOLUTELY AS SHE KNEW HER OWN EXQUISITE IMAGE IN A MIRROR.

Another hour. Avly started awake—she had not meant to doze—had she *missed* him? No, impossible. Some invisible galvanic thread that joined them would have tugged at her if he had reappeared. What then had woken her so suddenly?

Avly jumped to her feet, put on her shoes, and stood by the tree watching, in a kind of indifferent dismay, as a medical vehicle, siren mooing, dropped from the sky to the sidewalk.

Savage white radiance exploded from its interior as two medics and a medical doll shaped like a trolly with ramps leaped out and plunged up the steps of the very house where he lived. Only then did Avly grow rigid with fright. Had something happened to *him*?

Above, far up the façade of the mansion, one window filled with chaotic activity. In the vehicle itself machines chattered, and Avly heard a flat, mechanical voice: "Seven people, you say? All the same? Poisoning? How rare. Dying? Yes, from the roof will be best."

Then the vehicle lifted up and sailed to the landing pad on the housetop, presumably to ferry casualties via the roof elevator.

Avly's heart pounded. She decided she must herself run into the building.

Before she could stir a muscle, the front door reopened. And it was the man who came out.

He moved down the steps exactly as she had seen him do at the site of the fire. He was calm and self-contained. Gaining the pavement, he looked neither left nor right, but turned south along the boulevard.

Avly found she could not, after all, quite make herself follow him. She stared after his tall, spare figure, the swagger, the gloved hands. Realization had reached her. He did not live in this house at all. As the medical vehicle, siren loud and warning beacons flashing, rose from the roof with its—dying?—cargo, Avly put her hands and forehead against the trunk of the tree. She understood at last. The fire, and now—poison. Her lover was an assassin.

## HOW MANY DROOPING DAYS

[illegible] Avly knew [illegible] Avly. She marked them on a calendar. There were seven. Perhaps, in some remote manner, she was observing an unconscious vigil for the seven poisoned dead from the Yellow Quarter.

She had read about them, too, in the journals, for to die in this way was, as the voice of the vehicle had remarked, *rare*. It seemed the cause had been contained in some vintage alcohol they had drunk. Investigations were in progress.

Did Avly consider reporting to the city authorities what she suspected, or rather, was sure of? That this was no vintner's blunder or domestic accident, just as the fire had not been, and that he was responsible for all the deaths. Momentarily she did. Then, despite considering it, she saw she could not betray him. She was, for one thing, certain he would then reason exactly who had witnessed him and find her before officers of the law apprehended him. On the other hand, the notion of such a nightmare event brought her only one more perversely violent thrill. Common sense, meanwhile, instructed Avly that such a dangerous man's retributive anger should be avoided at all costs.

She could not stop thinking of him. Or dreaming of him.

Every night of the seven days, she pursued him through a surreal Dophian which, in sleep, had become deserted and vegetal and jet-black, with narrow shimmering defiles where he sprang forward, cat-like, and she slunk after, trembling with nerves and desire. She never caught up to him in the dreams. He never turned and looked at her. Yet, at those times, she knew he was aware of her and that she had a right never to give up. However, something else then occurred.

Information came to Avly, in a dream, of the assassin's forthcoming whereabouts. This was on the seventh night, and the message—for such it must be—was entirely clear. Slinking after her lethal prey through the jungle of the dream city, Avly beheld a tall tower that loomed out of the darkness. It had a glacial azure globe on its roof, and Avly knew it in a dream-second as the Communications Building in Blue. Across the sky above it were littered two sparkling numbers: 9 and 35.

When she woke on the eighth morning, Avly deduced that this had been relayed directly to her by means of telepathy. Evidently he would be in the vicinity of the tower tonight—tonight, of course, since he was a nocturnal being. The hour was nine o'clock.

The other number—thirty-five—almost paralyzed her with a sense of shock and dread that sank through her bones like syrupy spice. The other number, presumably, related to the tally of victims he expected to kill, by or near the tower.

Avly did not entertain a moment's doubt about this psychic signal from his brain to hers. But she did suspect he might not be aware that he had contacted her. Her acute interest in him had tuned her in, perhaps, to the frequency of his mind, which must after all blaze like a torch with its skills and crimes. Fate had taken a hand and sent her these facts for her use.

All day she lay about the apartment, not answering calls, not doing anything save brood and rehearse her now almost mystic role.

*I believe I am quite mad*, she finally told herself.

This seemed to liberate her entirely. She got up and went to make herself exceedingly beautiful for the coming night's adventure.

As Avly, arranging [illegible] and scarlet mantle, [illegible] through the city, experiencing all things in a sort of new wonder, Dophian blossomed to neon night.

At last, in the Green Quarter, she caught an individual public flyer. It bore her north, into Blue. An oddly magical ride.

Even the stars had a light, navy color this evening, outside the iridescence of the Arch.

On foot once more, music floated to her from bars, with the crystalline chink, like breaking thermometers, of goblets and bottles knocked together. Avly's sober blood itself seemed aerated with the spangles of champagnaut or vodsinthe.

The crowds parted, smiling benignly to let her through. She seemed to be the heroine of the drama, they the obliging bit players.

How many would die? Thirty-five. A momentous figure. This would be a catastrophe. Was he paid to do this work *or* was it only [illegible] of love?

A vibration from some timepiece fluttered out the essence of a quarter to nine, one minute after Avly had positioned herself in a wide plaza beneath the tower of the Communications Building. She stood looking up the tower's tiered stories. The windows were long and narrow, and it was sculpted from deep blue concrete, the globe from white sapphire.

Someone paused beside her. Avly knew it was not the one she had come here for, but still she half turned, made nosy at this ultimate juncture, by her fellow humans.

A blond young man stood close by, talking into a jeweled cellphone the size and shape of a beetle, and set in a ring.

"Naturally I know the tale. I read a screening of it only yesterday."

Avly's attention left him. Would he be one of those who would die?

"Yes, and she made this gesture that frightened him. So he ran to his employer," droned on the young man, annoyingly, "and asked permission to escape to Bokhara."

*What a pretty name*, Avly inconsequently thought. *Bokhara*. Her knowledge of geography was limited.

"But when the employer confronted her, she just denied everything. What? Oh, yes, I forgot. And that's how it ends."

Avly's eyes opened wide, gleaming like the edges of sharp knives. All across the square, she had seen him.

Seen *him*.

He was like a piece fallen out of the dark. His hair, his cloak, and clothes. She watched him as intently as if she were a surveillance machine. And so she saw him cross the plaza, and as he passed, his arm, the cloak, brushed over someone, only as if, courteously, he ushered this other out of his way—but the man tottered, choking, and all at once crashed down.

Avly caught her breath. He must be a genius at his art. Only that brushing of the arm and cloak, only that. Yet, too, she was confused. She had anticipated a major disaster being caused, to account for the deaths of as many as thirty-five people. A bomb, perhaps. But no one else even collapsed, and the plaza was merely full of sightseers pressing forward to watch the fascinating spectacle of someone else dying on the pavement.

The assassin, though, had moved northward, and away. Already his form dwindled in the distance. Avly hurried from the square. Then, despite her gilded shoes, she ran. For she did not mean to lose him now.

HE WALKED, and so therefore did she It became like her dreams, too, when they left the Blue Quarter after some twenty minutes and moved diagonally on into Violet. Here there were fewer and dimmer lights While the shells of unoccupied buildings stood like cliffs, open only on caves of blackness Most of the street lamps, even where they remained standing, were unlit. As for the rainbow Arch, this part of it seemed to have gone out, or to be obscured from below It was only a colorless, high ghostly bridge, arcing above, that, miles off, grew luminescent again astride other places Weeds noted, from cracked pavement and walls, into enormous forests So all her dreams, then, had been prescient Did he not know she paced behind him? They had walked by then—he some eleven or twelve meters ahead --for over an hour He never looked about at her; she never looked away from him And if any lived in the surrounding houses, yards, and streets, tonight they had hidden Unless it was only that, now, Avly had eyes for no other but one

THEY HAD REACHED a landing station for public flyers. In the slums of Violet, Indigo, and Orange, these vehicles were never individualized, but served up to as many as a hundred people at a time The landing station was crowded, so much so that, even if Avly had until now been blind to everyone else, she could not choose but see them here

The poor had serious faces, or so she thought. Serious and hard, or, if any mirth broke out among them, it seemed raw and barbarous, and definitely too loud Their garments had no attractiveness, in her opinion. She felt faintly sorry for them.

If he had come here to kill some of these persons, probably he did them a favor, as he had previously with the fire. The sole puzzle was why any of them required killing They had no power, no influence or money, and died quickly enough anyway.

But everything he did intrigued her, and appeared intellectually viable, if obscure Any scruple about his work had evaporated in the ecstasy of seeing him where she had believed she would, of following him along the lonely, jungled streets of Violet She cared only for him. Tonight they must meet, must talk Perhaps do more than talk

He and she. Destiny combined them. Avly knew this as absolutely as she knew her own exquisite image in a mirror. He might play at cat-and-mouse with her, but in the end why should he not succumb? She had everything he must want

Out of the black sky—even stars did not show above these quarters—the dull lighted, heavy hulled flyer approached

It landed gracelessly on the pad, and the crowd milled forward, thrusting itself into the interior, in and in, without any caution Surely it was overloaded, and more than a hundred men and women were now inside the car?

All this while of waiting at the station, Avly had kept sight of him, although he roved through the crowd This time he caused no disturbance, nor had anyone expired She assumed his current murder plot involved the flyer, and he would carry it out when everyone was assembled. Compunction warned her not to stand too close. She was about to retreat a little, when *he too* stepped into the vehicle

Avly knew one split second of reluctance Then she burst forward and drew herself after him and all the rest into the hot and jumbled body of the car.

There was nowhere left by now, naturally, to sit But he also was standing against the rail provided for patrons who had no seat

Some ten or so people had already wedged themselves between him and Avly

The muddy lights of the flyer dulled further as it lifted, not very smoothly, back into the sky

It was apparently bound for the Indigo Quarter, and then for Orange, or so the illuminated strip across the roof promised. But then, it did not matter where they went, it only mattered where *he* might go

What was he doing on this cumbersome thing? He seemed to have no concern about anyone aboard, and stood like most of the rest who must do so, his face a blank

None of the flying cars, even these out in the slums, had drivers they were operated by their own intricate mechanical intestines. This one lumbered through the air, and Avly frowned as slight turbulence seemed to hit the vehicle None of the other passengers, needless to say, paid any attention, they were used to such inferior transport

Was he simply traveling, as the others were, to another area of Dophan? Yet he was rich Why would he need to employ an unaesthetic public car—not to mention the sort of resentful squintings some had cast at Avly, boarding in her finery No one seemed to react to him, however. Maybe he often came this way Besides, now she studied him, although he was not dressed in the un fashions of the poor, nor did he wear the gemmed attire of the wealthy classes Perhaps this was the most clever form of disguise

His face drew her eyes again and again. She found it difficult to gaze at him for very long. Her vision blurred, her heart raced, waves of heat and cold chased up and down her body Seldom—never—had she been so exhilarated or *so terrified.* She had begun to speak a mantra to him in her mind, enticing him, persuading him, *making love* to him. If nothing came of this partial meeting, Avly felt she would not be able to bear it. She would fall into some despairing abyss His darkness lit the gloomy car for her like a smoky sun

They landed—bumpily—five times in the purlieus of Indigo, and much of the crowd streamed away. They were like ants, Avly thought, watching them mill down the ramps from the landing stations and off into the dreary channels of their quarter

But eventually, after the fifth stop, only some thirty or so people remained on the flyer. Thirty-five? The fatal number? What now would he do?

Before Avly could collect herself, he had left the rail, and as the flyer once more dragged itself skyward, he sat down on one of the long and otherwise empty seats

From there he looked back, and directly at her

Avly felt her physical body drop through itself onto the floor, while heart and soul rushed upward

His face was no longer blank. His eyes, very obviously, saw her He nodded. As if this were their arrangement, and they had both come here deliberately to meet

Avly, in a half trance, also left the rail. His gaze stayed on her as, shaken about and clinging to handholds, she made her precarious way to the seat. She sat down beside him

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" she asked him, when he did not say a word.

Still he looked at her, taking in everything about her, she believed, noting her appearance, her jewels, how she had dressed and scented herself to appeal to him.

Then he said quietly, for her ears alone, "Where do you think?"

His voice too was dark. It was musical and rhythmic.

It made her reckless Breathlessly she said, "With me?"

"Ah." The pause hung like a scorching wire in the air between them. He added, softly, "Or is it that you are coming with *me?*"

Rather than being forced now by her emotions to turn away from him, Avly could not take her eyes from his They were black, his eyes, a silvered black, deep to depthlessness, yet inaccessible She longed to fall into them and drown, but as yet they would not let her.

The flyer gave a lurch and began again to descend. Below, only half seen on the rim of sight, lightless Orange swelled to meet it

"This is the last southbound stop," he said

The car barged home on its landing pad. Avly expected him to rise, as the other passengers were doing. He ignored them, and the opened doors Presently the car was empty, but for he and she, and the doors closed

But "she said "don't you want to follow them?"

"Why should I?" His wonderful voice hypnotized her, as his eyes had done

*Continued on page 88*

# On Windhover Down

By Liz Williams
Illustration by
Allen Douglas

Better to serve the devil you know than the one you don't. It appears the same holds true for gods.

SERENA watched the manor road late in the afternoon, with an east wind at her back and November mist hanging low above Windhover Down. The basket, covered with a cloth, hung on her arm. Serena tilted to hold it as far from her as possible, but it was too heavy and she was forced to steady it with her free hand. Blood had seeped through the cloth and lined the bottom of the basket—looking back, she saw an irregular line of ruby specks dotting the cobbles. She prayed that none of it had marked the skirts of her only decent woolen dress. • She hurried along, trying not to look up at the long, white figure carved on the hillside. It was said to be bad luck to see it. Apart from the road to the manor, for miles he met no one to walk with you, following close behind, slipping through the twilight. Serena thought of bone-pale widows stalking the winter road, following the trail of blood. She kept her gaze on the path ahead, on the mist that gleamed in the puddles between the cracked rocks, and the thin hazel wands of the hedges. • By the time she reached the manor, the sun slipped over the edge of the Down and was gone. A blue haze fell across the land. She heard a wren ticking in the hazel, and suddenly, sharp warning, and there was something behind her: a rustling in the hedge. Serena hurried along, stumbling on the uneven ruts, not looking back. A blackbird shot out of the hazel, calling out. And then she was at the manor gates. They were open. Serena slipped through and pushed them firmly shut behind her. It made her feel only a little safer. • The manor stood at the end of a long drive. She could see turrets, a candle glowing in a pointed window. Story said that the manor dated back to the days of the old Queen, but since then it had seen the addition of many wings and outcrops, until very little now remained of the old dark-brick house. Serena thought it was beautiful, though they said that there were many such buildings in London and the north. Serena had never been beyond the bounds of Sussex, and to her London was as remote as a fairy tale.

Frost glittered in the cropped grass as she walked up the drive She felt the Long Man at her back, sightlessly watching through the trees that surrounded the manor, and felt a surge of fright and hatred She was relieved when, at last, she found herself before the kitchen door

A face looked out at her from the knocker with the green patina of bronze Metal leaves curled from its mouth; its eyes were wide and knowing Serena was surprised to see the old god, here on the door But he was at the back of the manor, looking toward the woods, rather than facing the new white god who had supplanted him. She reached up to run a hand over the knocker

*I wish we still worshipped you, God of green and growth* The Green Lord of the country, a more ancient figure by far than the one carved across the hillside But the rule of the Long Man, and all the other gods of the chalk, had lasted over a hundred years now, and they were surely here to stay. The basket seemed to weigh even more heavily in her hands She put it abruptly down on the step and reached again for the knocker

A moment later, a broad, middle-aged woman stood in the doorway, wearing an apron and dusting flour from her hands

"You're the girl from the village?"

Serena nodded. "Yes, ma'am The priest asked me to bring this, for the dinner" She held out the covered basket

"A bit late in the day, aren't you? The banquet begins at eight"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I couldn't come before There were—complications"

"Very well." The cook gave a put upon sigh "Place the basket over there, on the flags"

Serena did so The blood, which by now had soaked the bottom of the basket, pooled over the stone as she set it down The cook clucked her tongue

"The new man does not have Father Caius's touch, I see Now there was a man with a subtle hand! But I suppose we can't be too surprised that he left us for London He'll be a real find for that Thames side temple he went to."

Yes, ma'am." It would not do to say so in front of her betters, Serena knew, but silently she agreed with the cook. Father Caius had been a wonderful priest Whenever she attended temple and listened to his sermons, Serena felt safe, as though Father Caius truly understood the fears of his flock and the forces that beset them He knew what it was like, Serena felt, to see the Long Man as nightmare as well as god He would never have said so, and faced the charge of heresy, but with Father Caius, Serena knew that they were somehow all bound by a common understanding But the new priest, Father Orme, really did believe in the rightness of his worship, and that made Serena afraid And he had quizzed her so much, keeping her back after the temple services, asking all sorts of questions: *Did she like this or that young man? Was she still a virgin?* The questions had made Serena uncomfortable and she had taken to finding excuses to avoid Father Orme after temple

The cook twitched aside the crocheted cloth that covered the basket George Hamp's head stared upward, sightless and bloody The cook tutted again, sharply as a wren

"We'll have to tidy him up and no mistake I wish you'd brought him earlier"

"Yes, ma'am " Serena had not liked George Hamp, but neither had she rejoiced when it became known that he had received this year's mark No one deserved to go like that, especially someone with a little child Hamp had become hand-fasted only the previous year, with Marjorie already pregnant But Serena found herself unable to look away from the head, its mouth was slightly open, as if about to utter accusations She felt a strange, troubling urge to reach down and pat it, to reassure it as one might comfort a frightened animal She put her hands firmly behind her back

"Am I to go now, ma'am?" She did not know what she wanted to hear The thought of making her way back down the dark road to the village was alarming, but so was the prospect of a night in the manor's kitchens If only Father Orme had been less dithering, she could have set out in the morning and been back at her mother's fireside by now. At the last, so the goodwives had muttered, even Hamp had begged the priest to get on with the ritual beheading

"No, you are to stay," the cook said, gazing absently down at the head in the basket Serena stared at her

"But my mother will be expecting me

"Nevertheless, I have spoken with the housekeeper and she says that you are to remain here tonight It seems it is the master's orders. You can come to the hillside with the servants tomorrow, for the rite, and then go to your home. I will ask that a pallet be prepared for you, and some broth "

"Thank you, ma'am " Silently, Serena cursed How had the Lord known she was here? Had he seen her, or been told that she was bringing the head? The roaring stove made the kitchen stifling She could feel her head starting to swim "May I sit down?"

"You may take your place at the table," the cook said, with the air of one conferring a substantial favor

To Serena's relief, the head was taken into a pantry, and the flagstones scrubbed by a small, wan boy. Serena tried to talk to him, but he would not reply and only shook his head in a paroxysm of terror Soon after he had gone, a gaunt, cheerful woman came in

"You'll be the girl from the village? Lovely, then Just in time Cook was starting to fret "

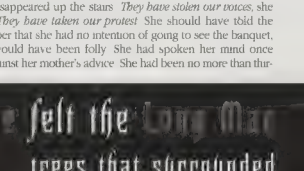
"The—the thing is in the pantry, ma'am," Serena said

"Lovely I'm sure cook will see to it " Smiling, she bent to pat Serena's shoulder "And I have a great treat for you—the master has asked that you visit us upstairs, during the banquet."

"The master?" Serena faltered

"Saw you from his study as you were crossing the lawn Such a kind man 'Bring her upstairs, Ellen,' he told me, 'so that she can see all the pretty things, a reward for bringing the priest's gift to us Won't that be nice?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you kindly," Serena said, inwardly seething as Ellen disappeared up the stairs *They have stolen our voices,* she thought *They have taken our protest* She should have told the housekeeper that she had no intention of going to see the banquet, but that would have been folly She had spoken her mind once before, against her mother's advice She had been no more than thir-




teen. The scars across her shoulders still burned on the anniversary of the whipping, and now she took care to say as little as possible to her betters

*No, sir. Yes, ma'am.* But at least they could not take her thoughts away from her; not even the Long Man could see inside her head, for otherwise she would surely have been struck down long ago. She thought of simply letting herself out the back door and running home, but it was fully dark now, and not a good time of year to be out alone And if she was seen to be sighting the master of the manor ... Hugh Sayet was not known to be a cruel man, unlike many lords, but he

kept to himself and no one in the village seemed to know very much about him. *Go upstairs,* Serena thought, *bob and mumble and duck your head, and hopefully it will be over quickly enough.*

She sat at the table, trying to make herself unobtrusive, as the kitchen became a bustle around her. The cook gave her a pile of turnips to peel, and she did this gladly enough, pleased at having something to do. She even watched with pleasure as the elaborate confections were brought out: an elegant sparkling swan, a tiny horned horse, all made from sugar. It reminded her of the tales her grandmother had told, of the old Queen's court and the marvelous feast she had once attended as a serving maid.

*The old Queen kept Them in order, make no mistake. Oh, They weren't as powerful then as They are now—folk gave Them Their due, to be sure, brought flowers and fruit and other gifts at the right times of the year, but the real honor—the blood honor—went to the Green Man in those days. That's how you summon all of Them, no matter what Their nature. I remember going up to the Lamptown Wyrm, white as the moon on Salisbury Hill, and I passed the Horse of Uffington many a time as a girl, when we lived near there. Carved in chalk, They were, to keep the land safe and conjure the spirits out from the hollow hills. But then the new young King made a bargain with Them, so it's said, to keep back the French from the south of the country. And now it's all Lords and their Figures-in-the-Chalk, and we just have to do what they say.*

Her grandmother's voice echoed inside her head, drowning out the noise of the kitchens. Serena kept her gaze on the table when the pantry door was opened. She knew the head was being taken upstairs, for there was a great cheer: perhaps cook had demonstrated some particular artistry with the thing. *Poor George,* she thought. *At least you'll have died in sight of glory, even if you are no more.*

The summons came halfway through the evening, just as the clock had struck nine.

"They'll see you in a few minutes," the housekeeper said. Clad in her black finery, hollow faced, she was nonetheless beaming. Serena found her cheerfulness disconcerting. She fussed over Serena's hair, unpinning it and fanning the blonde coils over Serena's shoulders. "What pretty hair you have. So pale, almost white."

"Yes, ma'am." Serena bobbed her head as dutifully as she could manage. "My mother came from the north."

"A York lass, perhaps? There. You look very nice. Follow me up to the dining room; don't speak until you're spoken to. But I'm sure you're a good girl."

Light chased shadows around the room, warring with the flickering fires of the hearth, casting ruby sparks in the depths of wineglasses and from the jewels of the women. The master of the house sat at the top of the table. Serena glimpsed a melancholy countenance, sad, dark eyes. George Hamp's head took pride of place in the center of the dining table, curls of vines spreading from the dead, boiled mouth. His eyelids had been sewn tightly together. Serena thought of the image on the doors and shuddered. George Hamp's head symbolized the death of the old order. Tomorrow, they would be worshipping the new lords of the land.

Ellen passed swiftly to the head of the table, skirts rustling, and whispered in the master's ear. He looked up, saw Serena, became still. He beckoned, a short, sharp motion of the hand. She did not want to go, but it was as though he had hooked a line to her body, she felt a thread of warmth uncoiling within. The guests all looked at her as she walked the length of the table and, one by one, fell silent.

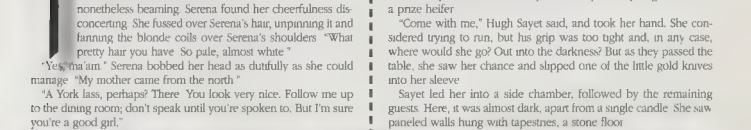
"Sit by me," the master said, indicating a footstool by his side. Serena did so. Gradually, the conversation resumed. The master turned to a woman on his left and began a long, fretful account of a hound's illness. Serena sat still, half relaxed, wondering if it would be no more than this. Perhaps the master just wanted a pretty face at which to glance from time to time; the guests were plain enough. But the nobility were rarely so simple. She wondered, with a creeping unease, whether she would be spending the night in the kitchens after all. She remembered Father Orme's questions with a shiver.

At last, the meal drew to a close. The confectionery swans were brought in, sailing on golden platters, and then the port. Serena started to rise, to follow the women out, but the master put out an absent-minded hand and pushed her down again.

"My dear, you may stay." Serena swallowed hard and remained where she was, gripping the velvet edges of the footstool. Seven of the men were still present, she saw, including the master, and two other women, both of middle age. She did not know who they were. They studied her as dispassionately as they might consider a prize heifer.

"Come with me," Hugh Sayet said, and took her hand. She considered trying to run, but his grip was too tight and, in any case, where would she go? Out into the darkness? But as they passed the table, she saw her chance and slipped one of the little gold knives into her sleeve.

Sayet led her into a side chamber, followed by the remaining guests. Here, it was almost dark, apart from a single candle. She saw paneled walls hung with tapestries, a stone floor




If she said *yes, ma'am* once more, she would choke, Serena thought. But she followed Ellen nevertheless, up the steep, stone stairs to the hallway. Here, it was dim and quiet. The only light came from sconces on the wall, but she could hear the sound of voices and laughter coming from a room to the left. Ellen led her to a pair of oak doors, carved with acanthus curling from the mouth of a man. Serena looked once more at the familiar face of the Green Man. Ellen pushed open the doors, splitting the face in two, and led her inside.

The dining room was filled with a long table and lit with candles.

"Sit," Sayet said again.

"Forgive me, sir, but I would rather stand," Serena said. To her surprise, he nodded. "As you please."

The guests formed a ring around the room, with Serena at its center. She thought of Hamp's head, splendid in the middle of the dining table. Was Hamp to be the only sacrifice that night? She knew she had taken Sayet's fancy, but as what? She slid the little knife down her sleeve into her palm.

"Now," Sayet said, to one of the guests. The woman handed him

*Continued on page 86*

Ah, the simple pleasures of
Arcadia—milkmaids at their pails,
farmers in their fields, mysterious
creatures in their castles...

# Country Life

A jerk of the carriage threw my head against the interior, which was wood, not the padded cloth I was accustomed to in Paris, and woke me. I opened my eyes to see my fellow passengers—country people all—staring at me as figures out of a nightmare might.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"We passed through Troyes while you slept, Monsieur," said one, a portly matron with a not-too-clean kerchief knotted beneath her chins. "We arrive at Virance soon, then on to Dijon. Do you travel to Lyon, Monsieur?"

"No, not that far," I replied coolly, reluctant to be engaged in conversation. Avoiding her glances, along with those of the other passengers—her young daughter, a worn-looking cleric, and a merchant of some sort—I tied back the curtain, a printed cotton affair sporting as much grime as the matron's linen, so that I could see out of the window.

We bounced over a charming stone bridge, common to the Ardenne region. The small river beneath it coursed away into the distance, bounded by fields and copses of oaks and birches. If I had to leave Paris to advance my prospects, at least the environs were pleasing, I reflected, fingering the silk-wrapped coin in my waistcoat pocket. If anyone had asked M. Poularde, he would have twisted his mouth under his tiny moustache and said that I would fail. And he would be happy if it were true, since my failure would chain me to his world—the little desk in the massive room, the window to the out-of-doors high above me, the tax documents passing one after the other under my ink-grimed fingers—as Prometheus was bound to his great rock, my circumstances depleting me as the great Titan was depleted when the eagle attacked his liver.

But no—I would succeed, and have pleasure in doing so.

By Karen D. Fishler • Illustration by Lori Koepoed

As the sky turned from a silken blue to the reddish hues of sunset, the carriage descended a narrow, pitted road, jouncing past low-lying fields of half grown vegetables bordered by some sort of irrigation ditch, and came to a clattering halt in the very center of a stone-built, very old village. A pretty place, I saw with satisfaction, if half deserted, with a communal well as you read about in old tales, and houses that leaned over the cobblestones of the main square with charming cross-paned windows. Next to the carriage, the door to the village inn stood open, and lamplight burst out. The moon was just visible now, more than half full and waxing, but other than the sky I could see nothing beyond the immediate cluster of buildings. The chateau must be beyond the far edge of the village, I conjectured

A boy emerged and the coachman began handing down my trunks. I climbed out of the carriage, leaving the door open

To my surprise, no one followed me. The clerk pulled the door shut.

"I wish you fair chance with your business here, Monsieur," he said, and the other faces stared out at me.

I had expected them all to stay the night as well, but of course having established myself as the object, not the exhibitor, of curiosity, I could not very well question them. Therefore I only bowed curtly.

The coach pulled away like a withdrawing apparition, and I stood alone in the cobbled village, listening to the dimming clatter of the horses' hooves, suddenly aware of the immenseness of the countryside, the deep dark sky. *We none of us know what is in our hearts*, I thought

"Monsieur?"

The innkeeper was waiting for me. I drew myself up.

"A room," I said. "I shan't be staying but a few days. A week, at most."

Once having seen to the disposal of my belongings and dined on a passable, if bloody, venison, I went to go for a walk, for, though I would not consider a peasant custom such as smoking a pipe after supper, even the best of Paris society will take an evening stroll. I had seen them myself from a certain distance, wafting like sprites through the Bois de Boulogne of a summer night. Besides, I wanted to spy out where the chateau lay.

But the innkeeper, a round faced man with stringy graying hair, stopped me, nearly touching my arm in the process.

"You would not go outside at this time of night, Monsieur?" he said.

"Why ever not?" I responded. Goodness, but these country folk presumed!

The man fidgeted under my gaze.

"You are not familiar with our town," he said, "and you might fall into a ditch."

"Firstly," I said, "this is no town. It is a village, the tiniest of villages. And second, I believe that even in Paris, we learn to avoid ditches."

"But—"

"But what? Wild dogs? Packs of wolves? Madwomen thronging through the countryside?"

He looked stricken.

"It's just—"

I waited.

"We just don't go out at night here," he said. I stared, and he added, "It's our custom to stay by the fire."

"The fire is too warm. Remove yourself from my path."

Reluctantly he stepped aside, and I opened the door.

This time, how good it felt to be alone! After the days of close quarters with other travelers and the heat of the inn hearth, the open air revived me.

The innkeeper was right, however. I saw no one else in the square. I pictured them all, sweating by their hearths, and smiled to myself.

The carriage had come from my right and gone on to my left. I followed its path, breathing in the scent of growing things and the soft dampness of the evening air. Clouds had gathered around the moon.

The cobbled street dipped once out of the main square, and the houses thinned. Shutters covered all the windows, so that the lamplight peeked out of cracks.

Soon enough the houses gave way to massive oaks whose branches covered the road. The branches shuffled continuously in the light breeze, but I could see almost nothing in that darkened passage except a glimpse of the smudged, moonlit landscape beyond.

Then I emerged almost into the open, where the fields lay, and stopped, my uneasiness returning, the trees still moving above and behind me like rustling skirts.

And there it was. On an isolated rise beyond a swath of land where cows stood motionless, half asleep, barely visible in the dampened and partial moonlight, stood the chateau, a stern thing of thick walls sheathed by trees, its style even older than that of the charming village and quite out of place next to it. Behind it the hill heaped up palely, frilled with dark firs here and there. It was almost as if the chateau had been carved out of the rock. No lights showed there. If the inhabitants sat by their fire, the hearth lay deep within.

A sound reached me then, almost a vibration through my feet, and then I saw that the cows were moving—not running, stampeding away from me. Their anxious mooing echoed across the open space and off the surrounding hills and the buildings of the village. It seemed the wind had risen, for the rustling of the branches had intensified suddenly, but as I turned and looked upward, a huge shape shadowed the road, darkening the darkness. I flinched and stumbled to my knees, then looked up again fearfully. Something enormous, with great wings, flew off toward the fields.

The creature made no sound, yet all was so quiet around me that I could hear the seductive swash made by its wings even as it moved away. The cows' mooing, fainter now as they moved away, had risen in pitch. They scattered.

Like some great bird of prey, the creature glided down, down, and fastened onto one of the poor beasts. Barely visible in the gloom, the cow collapsed to its knees, and the wings closed around it, shroudlike.

The cow's cries made me gasp in horror. Its companions continued mooing, a ridiculous and appalling background to the victim's death sounds.

More quiet but even worse were the sounds of rending and pulling, the crunching, the slapping sounds of splashing blood, that ensued once the cow had ceased making any noise at all.

I felt faint.

Backing up on all fours, I moved to return to the inn. The creature raised its head then to look toward me. For a moment I stopped, frozen by its gaze though its eyes were too far away for me to see. It could, I sensed, see *me*.

Then I cast my fate to God, got up, and ran.

Very well," I said. "You obviously will tell me nothing, and evidently have no care for your livestock. It is none of my concern. But you should have warned me of that apparition, Germain. I hold you responsible for not doing so. Your custom to sit by the fire? What nonsense. And there is the other matter as well. How can there be no conveyance to the chateau? I must tell you how disappointed I am in you."

While the innkeeper twisted his hands nearby, his wife set down my dish of *chocolat* and a loaf of bread, a hunk of butter on a white dish next to it. She muttered something.

"What, Madame?" I snapped.

"Should have known not to go outside," she said, her brow knitted. I opened my mouth to reply, astonished at her effrontery, but she whirled her skirts about and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Beg pardon for my wife," Germain said, humbly.

He seemed genuinely pained by what I had experienced, and certainly he had set about calming me the night before, when I had hammered on the inn door and, once it opened, fallen in gasping, my eyes wide, demanding to know what it was I had seen.

Pained, but not forthcoming.

"Hawks, they grow big here," he had said last night. "Got to be

careful, walking about at night Cows, they sometimes get eaten "

Now, as the morning sun filled the inn's timbered eating room, he turned to go.

"Germain," I said

He paused

"I do not believe you about the hawks."

"I beg pardon, Monsieur," said Germain

"No one else stops at the inn at present, isn't it so?"

"Yes, Monsieur "

"It seems the other passengers in the carriage would not stay."

"I believe the coachman had his route to keep, Monsieur "

"How many guests do you have in a month, on average?"

Germain's face twisted with the effort of computation

"Fewer than a dozen?" I ventured.

He relaxed

"Yes, Monsieur "

"And yet all is in good order here," I said. "Nothing needs repair, all is tidy and well maintained "

"Yes, Monsieur," he said.

"With what monies do you maintain your buildings and stock your larder?" I asked. "All of society needs money. It is life's blood for us all. Everything must be paid for. You are an innkeeper—surely you know that "

His mouth opened slightly, then closed

Ah, wife, her cunt has some money set by," he said Enough We do well here Quiet

*You see fourth as you look* I thought And, not so hard for me to assume, M P elaborate manner

We considered each other for a moment longer Then I picked up my knife

I will call on my colleagues when I return from the chateau" I said Germain tried to smile But I could not quite manage it

The walk to the chateau took me past the fields where the cows grazed, their sun gilding their backs Little streams trickled here and there, and trees sprang up by the waterside at intervals

The village was populated after all, it seemed A score of people greeted me before I exited the square, and now farmers worked in the fields on both sides of the road, where fences kept the wet out of the neat green rows

I had noticed a large outrigger toward the chateau's unadorned fortifications, but my curiosity flagged once I was closer to the great hill The farmers and their chatter lay behind me now, and all I heard were birdcalls and the gurgle of flowing water I had long since taken off first my coat, then my waistcoat, where the coin still lay secreted Rustles through the underbrush startled me occasionally, but as the sun rose, I found it more and more difficult to imagine having seen anything like the creature I had fled the night before. It was constantly in my mind, yet I could not accept that it truly existed. And given the interview that lay ahead, I must attend to nothing else for now

It was becoming clear why the tax office, that great hall with gleaming wood desks and high windows, as familiar to me as my own rooms, had received nothing from this village or the region close around it Obviously, all the money generated was kept here, making a little world unto itself, where everything could be afforded because nothing flowed outward

It seemed my conjecture had been correct. Virance had, in fact, been flouting the tax office's authority And through stupidity or fondness, no one else, not even M Poulardie himself, had noticed

I used my handkerchief to mop my face Despite my efforts to appear composed, I confess to staggering a bit by the time I completed the approach up the hill and arrived at the gate. The latter, timbered and nailed apparently by giants, could only be opened vertically, by means of some great chain I could not see. The stone walls meanwhile, towered over me, white and sere

I pounded on the gate and shouted

No answer. Again I thumped my fists, bellowing this time After a long wait, I heard a tiny pattering—steps!—and a young voice called down to me from my left: "Good morning, Monsieur."

I looked up A sort of watchtower overlooked the gate, and there was a fall of brown hair, a beautiful oval face, a soft gaze.

I straightened.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle," I said. "I come on an errand from His Majesty's government in Paris Be good enough to receive me "

She gripped the edge of the opening with both hands

"Paris?" she said. "You come from Paris?" Then she seemed to recollect herself, and her expression changed

"Ah, Monsieur," she said "Must you speak with us? Could you not simply return and say we were not at home?"

This ridiculous reply created a dilemma for me I found I could not simply mock such a lovely creature, for what would she think of me then? Yet I certainly could not return to Paris, for that would defeat my whole purpose

I thought for a moment.

"I have walked for two hours, Mademoiselle," I said, "and I am faint with thirst. Good manners dictate that you take me in for no other reason than this "

"Your pardon, Monsieur," she said. "I will bring you food and water "

"Mademoiselle," I said, insulted enough to speak sharply at last, "I am a gentleman I do not eat sitting on the ground at another man's gate "

I thought I would sink to the ground with exhaustion, she pondered my demand for so long

"And if I do not gain admittance here," I added, "two or three or more will come in my place soon enough "

At that she withdrew from the tower, and a few moments later the great gate began to creak and stir. It rose first by inches, then by feet, and finally I stooped and walked under it

A farm horse, thick-hocked and furry, was pulling the chain, laboring away from me into the center of the courtyard Now the young woman ticked it backward with a light whip, and the gate fell to the threshold with a thud behind me. The young lady released the horse and it walked away on its own, through an opening in the surrounding walls

As I approached, replacing my waistcoat and coat, the young woman curtsied, and when I reached her I bowed over her hand.

I am—

"What are you doing?" a voice thundered, and the young woman, cut off in the middle of her self-introduction, started and whirled about

A man, older than the young woman, robed almost like a cleric but in dark brown velvet, stalked down stone stairs that led from an upper gallery ringing the courtyard. All was stone here: the pillars and arches, the surface of the courtyard itself, the high inner walls. all stone, plain and pale in the bright sun. The man's dark hair contrasted against it, as his ill manners contrasted with the young lady's beauty and graciousness.

She clearly feared him, her hand, still resting in mine, quivered, and I heard her breathing grow rapid and shallow. But she held her ground

I could do no less. I released her hand and she stepped back a pace or two. I retained my position.

"What business have you admitting a stranger, Estelle?" he demanded, halting before us. His voice echoed slightly in that empty place, making me remember the cries of the dying animal the night before, echoing against the hills

The young woman lifted her chin, though I saw her bosom, under the fine linen, rise and fall quickly

"He is hungry and thirsty, Didier," she said, with a hint of reproof "And," she added quickly, as his face darkened, "he is a messenger from Paris, only the first of many if we do not hear him."

His face! His face! I had recognized it instantly, my hand going to touch my waistcoat pocket unbidden If a hawk had become a man, that man would have this countenance. the thin, curved, beaklike nose, the mouth set in a hard line, the eyes boring into mine like spikes, as if he were indeed a hawk, fixing me as prey. I had never

seen His Majesty in the flesh, but surely only our great sovereign Louis XVII could match the intensity, the superiority, the hauteur, the discernment of this man's expression.

I bowed

"My name is Henri Tavernier," I said.

He stared silently, and finally I turned to the young lady, whose helpless expression cut me as deeply as my own discomfort.

"Mademoiselle," I said. "Do me the honor of introducing me."

She gave a little curtsy and, indicating the man, said, "Monsieur Tavernier, permit me to introduce my brother, le comte Didier le Foulon. I am Estelle le Foulon, and this is—"

"He knows well where he is, sister," Didier cut in. "The question is, why is he here and what does he want?"

"We will ask him these questions inside, Didier," said Estelle with all her youthful dignity, "once he has had food and drink. He has walked here from the village, and needs refreshment before we can speak of business matters."

Where she came by such grace in this lonely, isolated place I could not imagine, but she shamed even her brother. She held out her hand to me, and I took it as if we walked side by side into the most glittering banquet in Paris, dressed in matching satin and jewels.

Moments later, I sat in a gloomy salon, Didier brooding nearby.

"Maman! Maman!" Estelle called, flitting away. She disappeared, and I heard female voices in distant rooms.

I kept my counsel until Estelle returned with a great goblet of water, a vessel large enough for Charlemagne himself and old enough as well. She flew off again and reappeared with a large plate of cheese and fruit. Didier ate nothing, but watched me as I devoured half of what Estelle had brought, and drank the entire chalice, as thirsty as any warrior of old.

Estelle had disappeared again, and now she came in holding hands with an old woman who walked haltingly, dressed in stiff brocade, leaning on a black cane with a carved silver top. Her gaze pierced me as harshly as Didier's, even from the end of the gallery.

"Monsieur, permit me to introduce our mother, Blanche la comtesse le Foulon," Estelle said when they reached us.

Having of course risen, I now bowed.

"Madame," I said.

The countess sank into a silk covered chair, gesturing me to sit. Estelle now joined us, and the three family members regarded me: mother and son with that raptor's gaze, Estelle with a different sort of hunger in her eyes.

I cleared my throat.

"I come as an emissary from the office of His Majesty's tax collectors," I said.

"Tax collectors! You dare, you presume—" said Didier, his voice rising.

His mother waved a ringed hand, and he subsided, but I felt a chill at his glance. I thought of M. Poulardе and, it must be said, of my ambitions.

"There is no record in Paris of your region, encompassing this chateau and the lands around it, or the village, ever having contributed a sou in taxation revenue to His Majesty's government, or the government of His Majesty's predecessors—"

"The butchers who killed the aristocracy? Those murderers?" Didier interrupted. His mother glared at him, but he took no notice.

"We do not speak of those times or judge those who have come before us, Monsieur," I said, doing my best to sound lofty. "We address ourselves—"

"We? You speak as a king?"

"I mean, of course, the tax office—"

"How dare you—"

"Didier!"

The comtesse had spoken only one word, but she might as well have thrown a knife at Didier. He flung himself back in his chair, glowering at me as if eviscerating me were his fondest wish.

"Continue, Monsieur," the comtesse said.

"Thank you, Madame," I said. "In this time of the glorious restoration, we concern ourselves only with the current situation. His Majesty cannot permit any area under his sovereignty to ignore its obligations to support the realm, alas, and so I must—"

"Mother, we cannot permit this!" Didier broke in.

A hiss escaped the comtesse's lips, and despite myself I shrank back in my seat. Estelle's gaze dropped to her lap and her folded hands. Didier fell silent, and there was a hush in the room. I realized then that the chateau was not merely lonely, but completely empty. There was no one here but the family. It was incomprehensible that they took care of themselves entirely, yet it seemed it was so.

"What do you wish from us, Monsieur?" the comtesse asked softly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out, not immediately. My ambitions were forgotten, as far as I was concerned. M. Poulardе could rise to be Chief Tax Collector of all of France. I simply wanted to be away, out of this woman's sight, where she could not look at me as if I were a rabbit she contemplated ripping open with one talon.

"Monsieur?"

Swallowing, I forced myself to remember who I was here. I reached into my pocket and drew out the coin I had carried from Paris. The coin a peddler had been given for payment here, in Virance, almost certainly by mistake, and had tried to spend in Paris, where he was arrested and where, once imprisoned, he had been eager to explain to me, the questioner sent by the tax office, where the beautiful golden piece had come from. The coin M. Poulardе had thereafter kept in his desk, unaware of its significance.

I set the coin down on the small table that stood before me.

"This coin came from Virance," I said. "We know that to be true. The question is, how could gold so pure come from a region where no mines are known to exist? And if indeed there is a source of wealth so refined as to create a coinage separate from that of His Majesty's currency, then surely that wealth is sufficient to yield its fair share of His Majesty's tax."

Silence, as profound as that in the road outside the village the evening before. Silence so deep I heard birds chirping in trees outside, and branches brushing against the chateau's outer walls. All three of the le Foulons stared at the coin, which glowed like a piece of the sun itself, a bit of the very stuff of life, in that dim place. The coin that bore Didier's profile … or that of the comtesse. I thought I saw despair on Estelle's face.

It was afternoon already, I realized. It would take me two hours or more to reach the village again.

I stood, and pocketed the coin again.

"Perhaps we could meet again tomorrow," I said, trying to sound brave. "You might wish to consider how to respond to my … question."

"You must go?" said Estelle. "But I hoped to hear of Paris. Maman …"

The comtesse had raised her head to gaze at me. Now she stirred and waved her hand at Didier.

IN MY DREAMS, I WAS DROWNING. BIRDS CIRCLED ABOVE ME, CAWING.

"Return him to the village, Didier," she said "Tomorrow you will fetch him again and he will rest here with us."

Estelle clapped her hands with pleasure.

You may well understand that I experienced many emotions on hearing this. Horror at staying in this place a moment longer than I must—and elation at the thought of seeing Estelle again so soon, especially since she so clearly needed companionship from someone her own age

Didier's feelings were unmixed, however

"The inn is good enough for him, Maman," he said. "It would be unseemly for us to—"

"Madame, I assure you," I said, "I can return on foot tomorrow."

I miss Didier," the comtesse said

"He is not a gentleman," Didier said

"You, however, are," said the comtesse

And that was that. Didier drew a small, ancient open carriage of black silk out from the stables, which fronted onto the courtyard, and led out a finer version of the draft horse that had opened the gate before The latter took up its post at Estelle's command and raised the gate for us

The sun was dropping by the time that silent, miserable journey ended at the inn door, where the village inhabitants stared at us from across the little square If it had not been for Estelle, I would have wished myself back in Paris, suffering under M Poulard's attentions, a thousand times over

"I will come in the morning," Didier growled at me "Be ready "

He slapped the whip against the poor horse's haunches almost before I could get out, and wheeled the little carriage around As the inn door opened and German stepped out, the comte forced the horse to a gallop and sped away

"Was that—" said German in astonishment

"Yes."

"But how—"

"Please, German," I said I should have made good my threat to demand his books, but I knew now that I never would "Not now I need wine "

In my dreams, I was drowning Birds circled above me, cawing I found my footing, but realized I stood on the carcass of a cow, which lay in the water below me. As I looked down, its eyes opened, and the water turned dark and began to heave me to and fro in great waves. I heard horrible sounds in the sky

I woke with an enormous gasp, my heart crashing in my chest, my hands clutching my body as if to keep it from falling into pieces It was utterly dark in my chamber

Then I realized that there was a noise outside, a rattling that went on and on It seemed to move all over the inn, as if someone were knocking at every window and door, trying to get in For a long time I listened, lying rigid in the bed. Then finally I lit a candle, drew on my clothes, and crept down the stairs

German and his wife huddled at the base of the stairwell They started as they heard my steps I said nothing, but joined them, the candle trembling in my hands

We stood there for an hour, perhaps, though it seemed much longer. Finally the noises died away Then harsh cries in the distance Then nothing

"I will be leaving in the morning, German," I whispered

They both looked at me, their faces weirded by the flickering light

"For Paris?" said German hopefully

"No," I answered, my voice dull "For the chateau "

"You would be better off returning to Paris, Monsieur," German answered

But I shook my head, and left them there to return to my bed

It took me a long time to get to sleep

"Understand Monsieur, we are unused to visitors at all, much less to demands," said the comtesse

"Demands? I hope not," I said "These are merely facts we must all live with I myself, for example, pay taxes to His Majesty.

We walked along the ramparts of the chateau—a castle, really, many hundreds of years old as it was. Didier and Estelle walked behind us Didier as grimly silent as he had been when fetching me from the inn a few hours earlier, Estelle glowing with happiness at having someone new to talk to

From here, the whole valley lay exposed, the trees miniature, the streams branching through the landscape like tiny silver veins carrying riches to the fields It was almost the view a bird would have I felt slightly dizzy, but determined not to allow the comtesse or Didier to intimidate me

"Still, it is unexpected," said the comtesse

"I understand," I said. "There will be, of course, no penalty His Majesty is gracious to those who return to the fold "

"And who else has returned, Monsieur? How many other rural aristocrats have you visited in this manner?"

"I have the honor to make you my first visit of this kind," I said "Of course, there are many of us in the office of taxation who do such work You might call us a company of musketeers of the taxation office "

The comtesse laughed politely and took my arm, leaning on her cane with her other hand

"How kind of you to come to us first," she said

"How long a journey is it to Paris?" asked Estelle from behind us.

"Several days, Mademoiselle, and the coach is uncomfortable But I do not doubt you would find the journey worthwhile," I said.

"Didier could take us in the carriage," said Estelle

"No, I could not," said Didier

"Estelle is a bit young for her age," the comtesse said.

"Maman!"

"It is only because we are so isolated here, Estelle," said her mother. "You lack sophistication

"I find Mademoiselle as graceful as any lady I have had the fortune to meet in Paris," I said, and glanced back to see Estelle smiling at me.

"Indeed," said the comtesse

We continued our way around the top rim of the chateau walls, and I peeked down over the edge now and then, making sure not to be near Didier as I did so

"I see no smelting or refining equipment," I said "Does it lie within the walls?"

The comtesse paused, and I realized she was surprised

"You will pardon my bluntness, comtesse," I said. "I thought we had established—"

"Of course," she said "There are lower levels in the chateau, accessible only from inside We are very private people, you understand "

I bowed, and we moved on

Over dinner we fenced with more words, and I knew as little at the end of the meal as I did before it The food was delicious but almost cold, and Estelle confided to me as she walked me to my room that people from the village brought food to the chateau in covered baskets, leaving it at a special entrance.

"Why do you have no one here to serve you?" I asked

We were at the door of my room, and Didier was walking down the corridor toward us, a lit chandelier in his hand, looking as if he would like to dash out my brains with it

Estelle looked sad for a moment

"Would you stay here?" she asked

"I would stay anywhere you were, if I could serve you," I said in a low voice

Her lips parted, but before she could speak, Didier came and pulled her away, gripping her by the arm. I watched the light of their candles recede, then disappear around a corner Silence fell, and I withdrew into the bedchamber

This was a larger room than any I had ever slept in, with a much higher ceiling that I was accustomed to. The bed had silk drapes the color of old dark-red roses that have begun to blacken with decomposition.

I left the candle on to fall asleep, but in the night I woke with a start. The candle was out.

"Shh," said a soft voice.

"Who is it?" I said.

"Estelle," came the whisper.

Shocked, I sat up and groped for my clothes.

"Leave them," she whispered.

I could see nothing.

"Where are you?" I said.

"Near you," she answered.

No man would be untempted in such a moment, and I know myself to be corruptible. But I thought of the comtesse, of conversing with her the next day, of dining under her eye, and pretending such an encounter as I now contemplated had not occurred. I knew I could not dissemble with such a woman. Didier would loathe me no matter what happened, and would assume the worst regardless—but the comtesse would know the truth. And if she knew the truth, I had no hope of accomplishing what I had come here to do.

"You must leave, Estelle," I whispered. "Please."

I heard her stir at the door, her silks rustling. I turned to the table next to me, where the flint lay.

"No," she whispered.

But I took it up and sparked it and lit the candle. Just as I did so, the flame blew out.

"Estelle?" I whispered.

But the door closed quietly behind her. She was gone.

"You two young people must amuse yourselves this afternoon," the comtesse said to me the next day. "I have my accounts and my reading, and Didier will help me."

Estelle smiled at me over the luncheon table.

"Maman, this is madness," said Didier with his usual rudeness. "What purpose can it serve, why must you prolong this matter?"

"We owe M. Tavernier the courtesy of a pleasurable country visit," said the comtesse, fixing him with her hawklike gaze. "Come, give me your arm."

Didier did so, but looked back gloweringly as he escorted his mother away.

As soon as they were gone, I turned to Estelle and said, "How could you do what you did last night? I cannot bear the thought that you might be dishonored."

She took my hand.

"And I cannot bear the thought that you would disappear forever," she said. "Paris. Please tell me of Paris."

"Estelle—" I began.

But she placed her cool fingers on my lips.

"Come," she said.

She took my hand and led me down stair after stair, until we had reached the courtyard. From there we went through one of the interior archways and found the horses, standing contented in their stalls.

Estelle patted them.

"I would miss them if I lived in Paris," she said.

"Estelle, where is the refinery? Where is the smelting apparatus for making the coins?" I said.

She shook her head.

"I do not know what you mean," she said.

I went to her and took her by the shoulders, turning her to face me. Her eyes were wide.

"Estelle, tell me." I said. "I must know."

She was like a soft flower, so unearthly beautiful.

"Tell me," I said again.

But she shook her head.

"I do not know what you are referring to," she said. "We do no smelting here, nor any refining."

"But your mother said—"

"My mother knows that your presence makes me happy," said Estelle.

My hands fell from her shoulders.

"Are you saying," I said, "that she would keep me here?"

"Why not?"

"As a suitor?"

"Perhaps we could marry," Estelle whispered. "We could escape . . . go to Paris."

I imagined the comtesse's reaction to a marriage between her daughter and me. Color flooded my face. I stepped away from Estelle.

"I am no pet or paid companion," I said. "I am a free man with a position and prospects."

I turned and walked away. Estelle called after me, but I stalked up the stone stairways and went up and down the corridors, shouting for the comtesse. Estelle followed me, saying my name, pleading with me, pulling on my arm, but I shook her off, opening this door and that, looking everywhere—

Until I opened a door at the end of a long, wide corridor.

"No!" cried Estelle, trying to pull me away. But I stood in the doorway as if I were made of stone.

Didier and the comtesse sat at a table heaped with gold. Didier had a nugget of it in his left hand, and in his right he held a sort of crimper like a wax seal—except that it was obviously meant for securing two slices of meat. Cold cuts, pickles and salvings lay like straw over the surface of the table.

Estelle wept behind me.

I walked into the room and approached them. I reached out and picked up one of the finished coins from the pile in front of them.

"Where does it come from?" I said. "The gold. Where does it come from, Madame la comtesse?"

"This must end," said Didier, his face distorted with rage. He raised the crimper as if to strike me with it. But the comtesse rose, more swiftly than I had ever thought possible, and gripped his arm.

"You foolish boy," she said. I was not certain which of us she meant.

Estelle had crept into the room behind me and now clung to Didier, who dropped the crimper and put his free arm around her.

"Do not hurt him, brother," she said. "He can tell me about Paris."

"Yes, Paris," said the comtesse. She fixed her eyes on me. "Paris where you work in the office of taxation, isn't it so, M. Tavernier?"

"Yes," I said. "And they will be very interested to know about your wealth. I know His Majesty will be pleased when I return with your due contribution."

"Will they? Will he?"

"Indeed," I said. "There are families, some quite exalted, who have suffered imprisonment for withholding payment."

The comtesse let go of Didier and came out from around the table toward me, leaning on her cane. Outside, the afternoon was ending, and low beams of sunlight came in through the windows, lighting up the table.

THE COMTESSE SMILED AT ME THEN, THE SMILE OF A RAPTOR. A VERY OLD RAPTOR.

"Possibly," the comtesse said. "Yet I doubt you could furnish their names."

"Are you questioning me, Madame?"

She lifted her cane and struck me across the face with the head. Estelle shrieked, the sound piercing my head, and ran around the table to support me as I collapsed to the floor. Blood flowed down over my left eye.

"Foolish boy," the comtesse said again, and now I knew she meant me. "My family has lasted for a thousand years. I would do anything to give them the life's blood they need. Did you really think you could steal from us?"

"I did not come to steal."

"You are on no mission from His Majesty, as you claim," said the comtesse, with utter certainty. "Oh, you doubtless work in the office of taxation. But your quest here has no sanction from His Majesty or anyone else."

I cringed on the floor. Estelle had her arms around me and sobbed quietly into my hair.

"You are a nobody," said the comtesse. "You are fit only to talk to my daughter and remind her that the world exists. At least, you were. Now you are not fit even for that."

"And what are you?" I snarled suddenly, rising up from where I had been crouching. Estelle clutched my neck. "What are you that flies about the countryside at night?"

The comtesse looked at me with an expression I could not understand and cannot describe.

"Or is it Didier?" I went on. "Either one of you is horrible enough to assume such a guise."

Estelle's arms slid off my neck. I looked at her in time to see her lose consciousness and slip toward the floor. I reached out to her, but Didier was already there, lowering her down and stroking her face. So beautiful. But lost to me—like the gold. Didier and the comtesse would protect both.

"I will leave you," I told the comtesse. "I will inform the taxation office of your refusal to pay, and the consequences will be yours to pay instead."

The comtesse smiled at me then, the smile of a raptor. A very old raptor.

"Do not linger on the road," she said.

I ran. I went to the inner stables and dragged the farmhorse to the gate, and hooked the chain-halter around his neck as I had seen Estelle do, and pulled him and pulled him until he dragged the gate up. Then I ducked under it and, with one eye on the setting sun, I raced for the village.

Monsieur. Monsieur, wake up, if you please."

I opened my eyes. Which was worse, the flapping and banging about the inn all night, or what I felt now that the sun came in through the cracks in the shutters?

Germain leaned over me. I lay on the bed in my clothes—all my belongings were still at the chateau, of course.

"There is someone here to see you, Monsieur," he said. "Please, you must wake up."

I sat up with a start.

"Don't let her find me, Germain," I said. "Or him, either. I must get away."

"You won't see her? She said she's waited all night."

"No, no, you must tell me how to get out without her seeing me," I said wildly. "Lend me money, I know you have some—you must help me, Germain—"

"Calm yourself, Monsieur," said Germain. "There is a back staircase. You can take one of our horses, if you promise to send it back when you reach the next village. And I'll give you some money, but don't tell my wife."

He left, motioning again for me to be quiet. I could hardly contain my anxiety, however, and paced until he returned with two pouches—one small, with money, and one larger, with food—and a cloak for me to wear. He handed me a small knife, which I stuck into my waistband, to use with the food. Then he led me quietly down a tiny staircase that gave onto the outer courtyard, where the stable lay, hidden from the town square. We could hear voices in the eating room, they paused at one point as if listening, and Germain and I stopped dead just inside the inn threshhold. But then they resumed, as did we.

"God save you for your kindness, Germain," I said as I mounted the horse he was lending me. "If you had not let me in last night, I should be dead right now."

"Safe journey, Monsieur," said Germain. "You don't belong here."

I turned the horse's head toward the opening at the end of the courtyard that would lead to the road.

But I drew back in dread.

I would have to pass Estelle, who stood on the step below the inn door, with Germain's wife behind her, arms folded.

"No, Estelle," I said. "Do not do this. Your mother knows me better than you do—"

"Henri," said Estelle. "I beg you, please do not leave me."

She approached the horse, her arms outstretched.

Her appearance had greatly changed in the few hours since the hideous scene at the chateau. Grimed with dirt, her clothing tattered and limp, she looked wild now, no longer the refined young woman who had looked down on me from the watchtower. And her eyes—what had happened to her, that her eyes held such pain?

I dismounted and took her hands in mine.

"You must forget me, Estelle," I said. "I am nothing, a stupid man who wished to trick his way into riches."

"Riches," she said. "I tried to bring them to you. All night I tried, and then as the sun came up I stood outside the inn door and knocked. I was so afraid you had already gone."

She took a pouch off her waist and handed it to me. It was small, but very heavy.

"See?" she said. "See? Inside—open it—"

Tears had come to my eyes. I shook my head.

"No, Estelle," I said.

"Is it not enough, Henri?" she said. "I can give you more, you see. It's so easy."

Before I realized what she was doing, she reached in and plucked out the knife from my waistband and made a quick nick in her wrist.

I gasped, and dizziness came over me.

Not blood. Gold. It welled out of her flesh in a soft, slow moving river. She caught it and held it out to me, a puddle of gold in her hand. No burning, no pain in her flesh. What was she, that she could do this?

"I am sorry about the cows and the other animals," she said. "I cannot help it. I become so weak without eating them. The villagers are kind to let me have them, are they not?"

Through the daze and the dizziness I became aware that the comtesse had come out into the courtyard through the inn door, her richly embroidered dress a contrast with the surroundings, and that Didier was taking Estelle in his arms, binding her wound with a piece of linen.

"I knew you could never understand," he told me contemptuously. "You never cared about her as we do."

"How long."

"Forever. One per generation, as long as the family has existed. Have you achieved a satisfactory result, Monsieur?" he said. "You have some of our gold now, and you have our secret, and we cannot kill you for it . . because Estelle would never forgive us."

Estelle was still reaching out to me with a haunted countenance, but I backed away and somehow got myself back on the horse. I remembered to throw Germain's purse of money back to him—with what Estelle had given me, I no longer needed it—and then I dug my heels into the horse's sides and galloped out of the inn yard, through the entrance and onto the road, and away, back toward Troyes ... and toward Paris.

The last thing I saw as I escaped was the face of the comtesse, that fearsome woman, and it was filled with sadness.

To this day I regret having disappointed her. ❧

# THE Archer

BY IAN DONALD KEELING
ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KERR

The pause she hates

The pause tells how severe it is going. This and the

when he lies.

the play. Of all the play she hates most. The

how to assuage it.

an inkling of the encompassing

of the word. Here. As if he knew what it meant to be alone.

She knows it is not his intention to crush her, she can see

in his crooked smile, but his eyes have the

possible to breathe.

LOVE IS HARD TO FIND UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, AND HARD TO GIVE UP UNDER THE WORST.

began to thrash in her sleep. Her lip unchanged.

"Well?" Aaraana's face appears above the cubicle

mischief.

"He said no."

"Oh, honey." The mischief falls away from her

"I'm so sorry, but at least you tried."

She cried. She had sworn

That she would stop trying. That she would

She would be no more self-inflicted wounds. No

bathtub alone.

"It's alright, honey.

tudes like a thoughtful

know the worst they can say is no."

"The worst they can say is no. Ha!

Denise Legamos's world has always been a world without men Her father fled before she could remember his face She had no brothers. Her mother raised her alone before dying when Denise was twelve Denise remembers her mother's death clearly, it had coincided with her first menstrual cycle Denise, alone and bleeding, frightened by the amount of blood, afraid perhaps she's dying, running to her mother's room to find a small grimace of anguish on an otherwise restfu. face

She had gone to live with her mother's mother. And though she had "blossomed into womanhood"—her grandmother s words—still no men entered Denise Legamos's life She watched an erotic world spin into life around her coy looks from behind locker doors, giggling in the halls, young boys, chests puffed out like pigeons, huffing about and beating each other senseless to catch some girl's fancy. But never hers. Oh, they liked her, the boys—but not *that* way Never *that* way

Finally, at seventeen, short,y before a "Jack and Jill"—they made it sound so harmless—Denise tried. And learned that *no*, when you have yet to hear yes, is indeed the worst that can be said

She was not a coward. Over the years, she would try again She was also, however, not a fool After university, after years of trying again, she said no more

Until Adriana prods her and Steven smiles and compliments her hair and she makes the mistake of thinking that maybe, just maybe, this time he'll say yes

"Listen, honey ..." Adriana's lips move like a children's toy

"Adriana "

"Yes, honey?"

"Promise me that you'll never ask me to do that again." Is this what her voice sounds like in the absence of warmth?

A sound escapes Adriana's throat like the cooing of a dove. And in her eyes, a look that is very much .like pity.

The rest of the day isn't so much unbearable as it simply refuses to go away People walk by her cubicle on eggshe.l shoes Adriana hovers over Denise with intended concern that feels like a police helicopter Steven does not avoid her, which is a type of courage, but twice she catches him looking at her with a smile that she is certain is meant to be reassuring. It makes her feel pointless and small

And yet she loves him. She thinks this two hours later as she thumbs through a pile of celery. Nothing has occurred in those two hours, though she has left the office, traveled four subway stops, walked two blocks, struggled with a string of shopping carts, and reached her hand into a sea of green, the must from above the produce section cooling her skin but failing to soothe her heart. Time does not pass for the broken hearted Distance and movement cannot be tracked. There is only a singularity point where all her pains and frustration meet And yet she loves him

She has a list of him the length of her veins, written in script that would fit on the head of a pin When destitute ch.ldren come by the office selling chocolate bars, he refuses the candy and sneaks a five-dollar bill into the outstretched hand so that all the money will go to the child He spends the entire year interviewing people so that at Christmas he can buy them a two-dollar present that fits their personality perfectly. He puts three teaspoons of sugar in his coffee; always overfills the small triangular paper cup when he gets water from the cooler, and continually asks the nearest person for the correct spelling of "argument." He has said she looks beautiful today exactly fifteen times.

Behind the lettuce, a mirror What does the world see? Steven is not the only man to say she is beautiful Her life is absent of love, not flattery Yet is it the truth, or just another façade of pity more subtly veiled?

What does she see? A woman, young, her hair dark and long and in waves Dark eyes, her mother's eyes, above a strong nose and chin. A full-figured body, long since healed from the ravages of teenage abuse Does she look so different from those women she passes by, seated in the window of this or that restaurant, a rougher hand resting on their fingers, eyes lingering on their own? Where are the differences, the discrepancies, the minutiae that fasten men's hearts to those women and not her? What does the world see?

"I knew a woman once who was caged like that."

He has short golden ringlets that have no right to sit atop a body that puts such effort into escaping the confines of his suit. He is leaning casually against a melon cart which strains to hold his weight A body-builder, perhaps a god. The smile is easy, the teeth perfect and white An actor then, or toothpaste salesman. His eyes are blue and green, both, and light, both in the manner of shade and what seems to emanate from them

"She studied her reflection so often one day it decided to switch places with her."

Needlessly, she flushes. "I wasn't ... I mean

"It's all right." His elbow rises from the melon cart as if preparing for flight Moves toward her with all the gravity of a planet. "You can tell when it's vanity." His eyes leave hers and wander to the mirror An unblemished hand reaches up and shifts one of the ringlets The smile, without changing, intensifies

"See?"

Thought is very nearly impossible under the weightlessness of his gaze "I'm

"Denise."

"How did you

"Please, accept my apologies I've been watching you for some time You shop here every Wednesday Last week, at the checkout, you wrote a check I was behind you in line; I must confess, I peeked."

Behind her in line. She must have missed him. Is this possible?

"I know this sounds strange and forward, and in this day and age, possibly threatening, but I would very much like to know, Denise Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Eight simple words. Common. Each one, from the time we are children, might be used every single day of our lives. And never before, for Denise Legamos, used in that order

"You want ... yes Yes."

"Good Tomorrow? Eight o'clock?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Thank you, Denise." One of those unblemished hands reaches into the jacket that nearly fails to contain his body "This is my card." The tip of his thumb is soft as a baby's bottom.

His carriage shifts, as if to leave, then pauses, his first hesitation. His eyes linger. If women ruled the world, his eyes might start a war. Within them, something deep and profound.

"I look forward to dinner, Denise." And he is gone

She blinks How could a man who filled a supermarket with his presence so suddenly disappear?

The card is pale red, not pink. On it, only an address

Denise Legamos, standing dazed near the celery stand, smiles She has a date

There is no question of going Her ignorance of his name is as irrelevant as the ringlets in his pretty blond hair Any issues of danger or attraction are completely overwhelmed by the fact that, for the first time in her entire life, Denise Legamos enjoys a day of possibility Thursday becomes a day saturated with anticipation Uncertainty flavors her coffee The telephone ends each ring by rising sharply in tone, as if it were asking a question The photocopier becomes a pleasant mystery instead of a frustration Every step is a cliffhanger every breath is fraught with suspense

And when she knocks on the door to a penthouse apartment at seven fifty-eight that evening, she does so without the foreknowledge of failure smothering her heart like an iron cage

The first thing is the smell. His apartment smells like that first day of spring that lifts your soul out of winter, washing away your discontents, even if only for a day. The smell lifts her across the threshold of his doorway and into a hall of wonders.

If the word *plush* could spray from our mouths with more tangible manner than sound, it would have decorated this apartment. Torches light the room and yet do not smoke. The upper edge of the ceiling is draped in velvet like a theater. Instead of being erected, the walls appear to have been hewn from wood.

She emerges into a room that is both majestic and intimate at the same time. Spacious enough to encourage her heart to fly, yet something about its confines seems to feather her skin like a lover's breath. Despite living alone for her entire life, Denise knows how a lover's breath might feel. She is not without dreams.

He appears, without warning, at her side, immediately conveying the sense that he could fill the room if he so desired.

"Eric Sorenssson," he says. His teeth are no less perfect than they were the day before. "And because I wanted to."

A moment will come, soon, when she will need more than this. But for now, she relishes the thought that it might still be so simple.

"Dinner is almost ready. I thought you might like some wine."

"Thank you." The goblet is stone, and warm to the touch.

"The apartment is yours to explore."

The wine reminds her why people spend money on such things. It flows across her tongue, seeking to fill all the cells in her palate with the taste of foreign fields, dusty drought and lit by the sun.

In a near corner of the room, there is a large dining table, presumably where dinner will occur. There is no sign of preparation. About the room, ornate furniture, all swathed in a river of cloth, is placed in a random fashion that encourages the body to lounge. Art and mirrors abound. All the paintings have a classical feel; she thinks she recognizes one or two. In one, someone has fallen from the sky—it tugs at her memory like a pulse.

For all the many splendors of the room, however, it is the far end that attracts Denise.

A fire burns within a hearth of stone and wood. Above the mantle, the only adornment at this end of the room, hangs a bow.

Greater in length than the height of a man, the bow has the width of a fist at its apex, and is strung with a cord the thickness of vine. A showpiece, surely—no man could draw such an instrument. Yet it hangs on the wall like one of the bones of the world. The wood unpolished, scarred in places. The string frayed and torn. As indisputable as the stone of the hearth beneath it and the fire that burns within.

And beneath its appearance, something else. A connection, Denise thinks, her eyes riveted on the bow. Beneath everything in the room, a rhythm, soft and insistent, somewhere between flesh and wood.

"My uncle made that."

Denise jumps. She had forgotten he was there. Something she would have thought impossible, like drawing the bow.

He carved it from a cypress tree struck by thunder." His eyes turn from the bow to hers, considering. They change.

"Shall we eat?

Cotton candy at the carnival. The tiramisu that she shared with Richard Vicky, the day she thought maybe, oh good Lord just please maybe, he might be interested, and the hamburgers from Shorty's, dripping with fat and guilt, she eats when the world is pounding on her door. The food, served by unseen servants on a table best suited for the diplomacy of fairy tales, tastes of all these things and more. She takes a bite of something green that reminds her of the souvlaki she ate at Angelina Papachristos's house, the day Angelina's mother—three hundred Grecian pounds of *Eat! Eat!*—wouldn't let Denise leave before she added three inches and some character to her waistline.

The meal is so enthralling that minutes pass before she realizes that he is staring at her in bemused silence.

"So, Denise." His voice sparkles like a ballerina. "Who are you?"

She flushes into her glass of wine. It is the innocuous question one asks over dinner but it has never, over dinner, been asked of her.

"I'm an assistant producer for a children's network."

His head tilts to one side in the manner of a terrier pup. "Why is it that when you ask North Americans who they are, they always reply with their employment?

Once more, her sun threatens to betray her like a schoolgirl's, but this time she holds. Her chin comes up. She has been alone for so long, and he has curls in his hair that bounce like fields of wheat in a musical, but she is not some mousy librarian with chestnut hangs and glasses the size of satellite dishes. She is not a schoolgirl.

"Well then, Eric Sorenssson, who are you?"

For the first time his smile is genuine. It rests on his face for a moment. Then ... "Denise, have you ever been loved by a man?"

She is not a schoolgirl. "You didn't answer my question."

"Actually, I am in the process of doing so."

Are you sure you're not in the process of trying to get me into your bed?

That she says this shocks her. There is a difference between strength and sass. Suddenly, she feels as if she were in a Bogart film, framed in black and white.

His laughter fills the room. "That is not an unfair accusation. Not accurate, but not unfair." A pause. "Is there anyone that you have loved, Denise?

**THE ARROW CUTS THROUGH HIS TORSO LIKE A KNIFE DROPPED INTO THE SEA, AND THE WORLD EXPLODES IN THUNDER AND LIGHT**

She thinks of Steven. Odd, sitting across from this challenging man with eyes like a preacher's sin, but she thinks of Steven. Perhaps it's the eyes.

"What if there is?"

"What if I could help you do something about that?"

"Oh, that's sweet. What are you going to do, Cupid, pull back your ..."

Her voice falls. Behind him, on the far side of the room, the bow hangs above a hearth of wood and stone.

"Something like that, yes."

She looks around the room. The paintings are filled with naked men and women and half-creatures that have hooves. There are less statues in the Acropolis.

"Oh my God," she whispers.

"Something like that," he says, again, softly. "Yes."

The black and white movie explodes into color. "I have to go."

He rises with her. "You don't have to."

Yes, I do." She's halfway to the outer hall, beside a sculpture with no arms. "I have a lot of—are you really him?

He stands still, like a pond. "Yes."

She thinks of Steven.

Hope is the worst thing. Any small drop of nourishment and hope will erupt like a barbaric child, and any fragile barriers to anguish we've erected will collapse like so much tinsel and straw. She thinks of Steven and immediately pictures life without him, life without anyone. The life that she has led until now stretching out before her like a series of empty rooms reflected by mirrors that hang opposite one another.

The tears come quickly and bundle in her throat. "If you're lying—please—oh God, you can't—please, don't be about this. Please, don't

he about this."

Still he doesn't move, but his face softens. "I'm not lying, Denise. I know who you are, what you have suffered. He can be yours."

A part of her knows this is wrong, but all she can picture is empty rooms for the rest of her life. "OK," she says.

"Come."

She doesn't actually see him rise off the ground to retrieve the bow, but it hangs high on the wall. He must have flown. Despite its size, the bow fits into his hand with the minute perfection of a machinist's tool. With his other hand, he reaches into the fire and removes a quiver. Imperceptibly, the sound of beating hearts intensifies.

They board an elevator. Denise cannot take her eyes from the bow.

"It took my uncle a dozen years to craft, and another dozen years to make the quiver and arrows," the god says with a smirk. "Vulcan never lets a reunion pass without reminding me of his efforts, and I never let a reunion pass without reminding him that while I am still celebrated in song, his name has become synonymous with a television show that was canceled after only three years."

The elevator stops and they step out onto a rooftop, high above the city. Without breaking stride, the god walks to the edge. "Find him."

"How...?"

"Use my eyes."

The immediate world drops away, replaced by a reality encapsulated with the precision of an atomic microscope. Without any sense of disorientation, Denise watches walls melt away, buildings become ghosts, and distance and height become abstract concepts. She finds Steven with remarkable ease.

There.

"I see him. Eighteen blocks away. He's handsome. Pretty eyes."

He makes Steven sound like a plastic toy. "He's more than that."

"Don't get defensive, Denise Legamos." The binocular world recedes and she turns to find a now familiar smile. "They are always more than that."

From his belt, he produces a flat stone the size of a child's arm. From the quiver, an arrow the length of his spine, gold and sharp-pointed. "Give me your arm."

She holds out her arm, which he holds over the stone. Without warning, he cuts the point of the arrow across her wrist. Two drops of blood fall onto the stone and disappear as if into a sponge.

Before she can protest, he releases her arm. The skin is unblemished. Not even a scar.

"How...?"

"The arrows must be sharpened with the blood of the intended," the god says, and grinds the head of the arrow across the stone, once for each side. He holds the head up to an eye brighter than the moon in the sky, nods once, then looks down at her. "Ready?" He is no longer smiling.

Her head is empty from the magnitude and peculiarity of what she is witnessing. She nods, once.

The god raises the bow. Nocks the arrow in the string corded like vine. Draws.

Instantly, there is sound. What had been a subtle, underlying rhythm erupts into song. There are nine voices, all women, and they sing from the height of heaven. There is a violent rushing, like a broken dam, hurtled in the night toward the unexpecting. There are moans and sighs and exhortations to every deity in all the world. And, under everything, the beating of a heart.

Inexorably, the god draws back the shaft until it meets an eye as piercing as the tip of the arrow's head. The song builds to a crescendo. A sound that might be a caught breath.

*Release.*

For a moment, nothing but the beating of the heart. It takes two of these for the arrow to cross eighteen city blocks.

The arrow cuts through his torso like a knife dropped into the sea, and the world explodes in thunder and light. As he stumbles on the street, a hand clutched to his chest, the song crashes over his body in a visible wave. Colors stream from every pore in his skin. A hundred thousand promises break into the sky.

And eyes with the weight of mountains are pulled across the city and lock onto Denise's own.

"It is done."

She blinks. The god is looking down at her, his smile not completely benign. Eighteen blocks away, a man shakes his head, the street continuing to teem like ignorant children.

"That's it?" she says. The sound of a heartbeat has not faded. Now, it is her own. "It seems so simple."

"It is simple," the god replies. "It is the simplest thing in the history of the world."

"Oh."

"You should go."

"Oh," Denise says again. Suddenly, the enormity of what has occurred strikes her as clearly as one of the arrows in his quiver. She feels ungracious and small.

"Don't." The smile changes, now warm and filled with music. A hand softer than the petals of a rose cups her cheek. "You should go. He'll be waiting."

The next week is a fairy tale, all a dream, the Hollywood ending.

She doesn't even have to wait until the next day. Seventeen minutes after she arrives home there is a knock at her door. Steven is smiling like an inebriated fourteen-year-old and asks her if the offer for coffee is still open. He actually toes the carpet outside her apartment.

He opens every door. He stands when she stands. He buys her roses from the guy selling roses that no one ever buys roses from.

Later that night, he cries out in surprise. Staring at the blood on the sheets, he says, "I never dreamed." When she reassures him that he is the first, he runs a hand down the side of her cheek so softly that it is the gravity of his skin that sets her nerves afire. "Men are blind and all fools," he says with a softness to match his touch.

She expects him to act like a zombie, as if he was bound by a spell, but he is present and shrewd in his love. By the third day, he is already mocking her gently, his wit like a hundred tiny bites across her shoulder blades. On the forth day, he surprises her in the stairwell—three minutes later they shock the ever-living hell out of Adriana. They have a fight on the fifth day; it ends on the kitchen floor, the table heaved to one side, the linoleum clinging to her skin. Their affair is complete: it is romantic and embarrassing and grand.

On the seventh day, she returns to the god's penthouse.

"I was hoping you would return." His eyes are green now, but the smile remains flawless and white. "I'll fetch us some wine."

This time she ignores the far end of the room, as much as it can be ignored with its hearth and bow, and studies some of the paintings. They are all exquisite and smell of authenticity.

She stops in front of one. There is a small plaque beneath it, as if it were a piece in a museum. It reads: *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche.* The god is young, his wings absurdly small. The woman is beautiful in the classic style that women are beautiful in paintings. The painting carries the distance of mythology and yet Denise can feel the gentleness in the kiss that the god places on the woman's brow, and the sadness in the woman's eyes tugs at her heart as if threatening to uproot something vital.

"They were to live forever."

The god's voice boulders across her left shoulder with the weight of an oracle. This time, Denise isn't startled.

"And Psyche was raised up to the heavenly assembly, and she drank from a cup of ambrosia, and she became immortal. They were tied together, and the god would never break from the knot to which he was tied, and their nuptials would stretch on into perpetuity."

"They were supposed to live forever."

A sadness drops into his voice, a sadness reflected in the eyes of

the woman in the painting

Denise turns. "But they didn't," she says softly. "Did they?"

His smile, for the first time, does not show his teeth. "There is a truth to a great many myths." A pause. "But not all myths are true."

The silence expands for a moment, then he hands her a glass of wine. "You have been part of an extraordinary thing. I expect you have questions."

"Just one," she says. The wine, white this time, tastes like it has been dipped in moonlight.

"Why?"

"Why."

He turns with the flourish of an actor and his eyes sparkle over his shoulder with all the madness and mischief of a seven-year old boy. "Isn't it enough that I am the capricious god of love, and that this is what I do?"

Is that it?"

The mugging stops. He squares his shoulders to hers. "That wouldn't be enough for you, Denise Legamos, would it?"

She is standing facing a god. She should be afraid, she should be overwhelmed. A week before, she had been. Now.

"No," she says.

"No," says the god.

He stares at her for a very long time. Looks over her shoulder at the painting behind her now. Then.

"We do not have the greatest record of fidelity, we gods. Nonetheless, our love, once won, is pure. I did not think to love another after I did not think to love another. Then, some thirty years ago, while gallivanting with my grandfather near our home, a young woman emerged from the sea.

There are many ways to fall in love, I am but one culprit. When that woman stepped onto the beach, her feet slippered in the same foam from which bright Venus once was born, I was struck by some other god's arrow.

Unfortunately, the young woman also caught my grandfather's eye, and my grandfather, as much of your western arts can attest to, can be rapacious in his interest of the fairest sex. However, though he is our king and his might exceeds any three of us put together, in the field of love one has certain advantages. I pierced the woman's heart and we were wed not long thereafter."

He is looking away now. Something dark flashes across his face like the shadow of a cloud across a field of burnished oats. "My grandfather has slept with more women than are currently alive. I had not thought denying him one would raise his anger. I had done worse, I thought, to him in the past.

THE SUIT FALLS AWAY AND A MILLION FEATHERS, INNOCENT WHITE, STRETCH OUT AS IF TO ENVELOP THE WORLD.

"I was wrong. He threatened to sear the woman's soul from the face of the world if I remained at her side. I left to protect her, and even this — even this was not enough."

The god's eyes come round to hers and meet.

"My grandfather conspired with the Fates to lay down a curse upon my wife and the child that she carried when I left. The child of the god of love, his daughter unborn, would never know a man's love for all the days of her life."

It strikes her with the force of ice water, and a dozen mysteries unbind before her eyes. The missing piece from every man's greeting. The unsaid enquiries that never followed flattery.

The empty space beside her in all the portraits ever taken and within her mother's soul.

Something near Denise's heart breaks open and free.

Anger echoes in what he says next, anger and resentment and stricken pride. "I let him do this. I, who have laughed outside the restraints of Olympus for millennia untold, I let him do this thing. To me. To you. I let him do it for thirty years. I will not let it continue for any longer."

She thinks it startles them both when she begins to laugh. A sharp, short crackle of laughter, like a pebble springing loose from a breakwall, followed by the flood.

Gods, she would imagine, rarely look befuddled. "You … you don't believe me?"

She is gasping for air. "Of course, I believe you." How could she fail to believe him? His tale stretches the bounds of reality, and yet snaps neatly into the empty shape of her life. She has a father. And he has freed her from the curse that has crafted her days. But.

But I have to ask you to undo it." She can't stop laughing.

I beg your pardon?"

"Steven. The arrow. I need you to undo it."

"Don't you love him?"

She stops laughing. "Of course, I love him," she snaps. At the god. At her father.

"Are you unhappy?"

She takes her time. "This last week has been the happiest of my life. And I thank you. You have given me a wonderful, wonderful gift." She smiles. "A gift from the gods." A pause. "But I've been alone my entire life. And maybe it's a curse, but it's mine to bear. And if it's to be broken…

"I don't want love to be a gift from some god, or even my father. Maybe that would be enough for someone else. I … I've earned more."

What if love is always the gift of some god?"

Is it?

No.

A warm silence. "What now?"

He takes a breath that fills his suit. "Come."

They retrieve the bow and quiver. Return to the roof. They find Steven with the eyes of the god.

He's sitting on a patio in a café thirteen blocks away. There is a pad of paper in his lap and a pen in his hand. He is staring into the sky. His eyes are the color of grapevines and carry the grandeur of mountains.

"If you do this," the god says softly, "he will never love you again. I'm sorry. It may not be the nature of true love, but it is the nature of the bow."

"That's all right," she lies.

He removes an arrow from the quiver, blunt and tipped with lead. He nocks the arrow in the string like wine.

"What, no blood this time?"

The god's voice has become cold. "The blood has already been spilled."

And draws.

The sound of screaming. Nine voices, all women, hurling epithets and bile. Broken glass and an infant's wail. And under it all, the beating of a human heart.

The shaft reaches the god's eye. A final plea, soft and desperate.

*Release.*

For a moment, nothing but the beating of a human heart. Two of these to cross thirteen city blocks. Then.

Silence.

She watches him blink, as if confused by a sudden disturbing thought. His eyes leave their exploration of the stars and look around the café. The pen comes to a rest on the table.

It is done."

*Continued on page 88*

# Charlie the Purple Giraffe

**Cartoon laws of physics: If you don't look down after walking off a cliff, you won't fall. If you smash against a tree, you'll peel right off. If you alienate your readership, you'll die.**

# was Acting Strangely

JERRY THE ORANGE SQUIRREL was walking down the sidewalk one day when he saw some word balloons floating above the hedge beside him. It was the voice of his friend Charlie the purple giraffe. "A man has to have a proper garden, doesn't he?" Charlie was saying. "And what makes a proper garden? Proper plants! And what do you need for proper plants?"

After each question, Charlie seemed to be waiting for an answer. But no response was visible

"You need proper dirt!" Charlie continued. "And what do you have to have for proper dirt?"

Intrigued, Jerry scampered to the top of the hedge and stared down What he saw made the little lines of surprise come out of his head

"You have to have proper worms!" Bent double, Charlie was busily tying a Windsor knot around the neck of a common garden worm. Beside him, a large tin can—its ragged-edged lid tilted at a rakish angle—squirmed with hundreds of worms in tiny top hats, spats, and bustles

It wasn't the worms that surprised Jerry, though—Charlie did that sort of thing all the time It was the fact that Charlie was speaking into the thin air

"Who ya talkin' to, Charlie?" said Jerry

Charlie was so startled that his eyes momentarily jumped out of his head. But he quickly regained his composure. "The worms?"

"Worms don't have ears."

**By David D. Levine**

**Illustration by Dirk and Lieve Michiels**

"Uh ... I was talkin' to *you*, Jerry."

"You didn't even know I was here."

"Sure I did! I was just pretendin' I didn't."

"Uh huh." Jerry's words dripped frost. One linen-clad worm raised a parasol against the drips.

"As a matter of fact, I was just about to invite you in for tea. Care to join me?"

"Yeah. We can have a nice chat."

They walked from the yard into Charlie's cozy one-room bungalow. It was pink today, with cheerful curves to its walls and roof, and was surrounded by smiling purple flowers. The entire interior was wallpapered in blue and yellow stripes, which clashed with the green and black stripes of Charlie's suit.

Charlie poured tea for the two of them, holding the tiny teapot delicately between white gloved finger and thumb. A musical note came from the pot as he set it down. He seated himself and lifted his cup, pinky raised—though he did not drink, for his arms were too short to reach his head. "What brings you out on this fine morning?" he asked. His words were sprinkled with rainbows and candy canes.

Jerry sipped his tea for a moment. "Charlie . . you have to admit you've been acting a little strange lately."

"Strange?" Charlie's eyes darted to one side, then returned to Jerry. Jerry set down his cup. "You've been talking to yourself."

"Me? Talk to myself?" He slapped his knee and laughed, not very convincingly. "Why should I talk to myself, when you're so much more interesting than I am?"

"I've seen you do it. Like just now."

"I told you, I was talking to you."

"What about last week, when you were working on your car? I saw you from three blocks away. Every once in a while you'd wave your wrench and pontificate. It was like you were trying to convince someone of something, but there was nobody there."

"I was ... rehearsing. I'm giving a speech to the Rotary Club next week."

Jerry hopped up on the table. "Charlie, there is no Rotary Club in this town."

"It's in . . another town."

"What other town?"

Charlie passed his cup from hand to hand. He stared fixedly at a point on the wall. It was as though he were staring out a window, but there wasn't even a painting there—just the wallpaper, which was now patterned in pink and white polka-dots. His expression was grim, almost angry. Finally he brought his head down to Jerry's level, cupped his glove to his mouth, and whispered, "I wasn't talking to myself."

"Oh?"

Charlie peered theatrically from side to side, then leaned in even closer. "I was talking to the readers."

Jerry crossed his arms on his chest. "There's nobody here by that name."

"It's not a name. It's . . what they do. Readers. People who read."

"Who read what?"

A change came over Charlie then, like a cloud passing in front of the sun. He placed his hands flat in his lap, straightened his neck, and took a deep breath. "Us," he said at last. "They read us."

"I don't understand."

Charlie stood up and began to pace, his hands tightly clenched behind his back. His strides were long, and the house was tiny, so he could only take two or three steps in each direction before having to turn around. "Jerry," he began, then paused. "Look .. do you ever ask yourself, why am I here? What is the meaning of life?"

"Sure. Sometimes. Doesn't everyone?"

Charlie stopped pacing, turned suddenly, and leaned down to Jerry again. "We make them laugh." His tone was deadly serious. "Them."

"The readers. We were created to entertain them."

Jerry waved his tiny paws in a broad gesture of negation. "Whoa there, big guy. Jerry the squirrel is nobody's creation and nobody's patsy. I'm here for *me*."

"Sorry, Jerry, but it's the honest truth. We're just characters in a comic book."

Jerry fixed Charlie with a hard, beady stare. "Prove it."

Charlie's eyes closed and his shoulders slumped. He turned away from Jerry. "I can't."

"Then how do you know it's true?"

"I've always known, I think, in the back of my head somewhere. But then one day . ." He turned back to Jerry, and his eyes were two black pits of fear and despair. "I had just said good-bye to Hermione the hedgehog, I turned back to go into my house, and then . . suddenly everything was black. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. I was squashed flat. But somehow I knew that all around me, piled above and below me like a huge stack of pancakes, was everyone and everything I have ever cared about. They were all squashed flat too, but I was the only one who knew it. That went on for a moment that seemed like forever. And then I was right back in my house, as though nothing had happened."

A thought balloon appeared above Jerry's head. "He's bonkers!"

"I know it sounds crazy. But it was as real as anything. And ever since then ... I know we're being read, and we're being laughed at."

"I get it," Jerry said with false cheer. "When you talk to yourself you are telling them jokes."

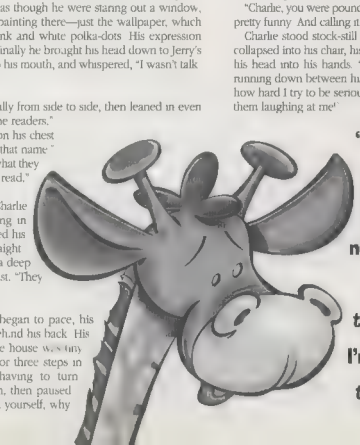
"No!" Charlie's hands bunched into fists, and he pounded the air ineffectually. "I'm trying to *explain* myself!"

Jerry scratched his head, and a few question marks came out. "You certainly aren't doing a very good job of it now."

"Well, for instance . last week, when I was working on my car. I was just putting the engine back in for the third time, and I was explaining to the readers that this was a very delicate operation and had to be performed with the utmost care. Not funny at all."

"Charlie, you were pounding it in place with a sledge hammer. That's pretty funny. And calling it a delicate operation just makes it funnier."

Charlie stood stock-still for a moment, his lip quivering. Then he collapsed into his chair, his purple neck arching high as he dropped his head into his hands. "I know!" he sobbed, big blue teardrops running down between his fingers. "No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try to be serious, it comes out hilarious. And I'm tired of them laughing at me!"



**"I don't think they watch anyone else. I mean, they're watching you now, because you're with me. But eventually they'll come back to me. I'm the main character in their little comic book."**

Jerry offered his handkerchief, and Charlie blew his nose in it with an immense orange HONK

"These 'readers' . can you hear them? Can you see them?"

"No." He didn't raise his head from his hands.

"Then how do you know they're laughing at you?"

"I just know. The same way I know they're there."

"Where are they, exactly?"

"Right now? Over there."

Jerry followed Charlie's pointing finger, but there was nothing there but the green and white flowered wallpaper. At least it was prettier than the pink and white polka dots that had been there before. "I don't see anything."

"Neither do I. But they're there. They're always there."

"Always?"

"Well, most of the time." He lifted his head and tried to return the sodden handkerchief, but Jerry gestured for him to keep it. "I don't think they watch anyone else. I mean, they're watching you now, because you're with me. And they might watch you for a while after you leave here. But eventually they'll come back to me. I'm the main character in their little comic book."

Jerry's tail bristled. "Why you? Why not me?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. That's just the way it is, I guess."

Jerry paced back and forth on the table for a time, thinking. Finally he spoke. "I think you ought to talk with Dr. Nocerous about this."

Charlie shook his head, a slow rueful motion. "OK. . but I don't think it will do any good."

Doctor Nocerous's office walls were completely covered in diplomas, from such institutions as THE SCHOOL OF AARDVARKS and WAZUPWIT U. The doctor himself was a stout gray rhino, nearly as wide as he was tall, whose wire-rimmed glasses perched incongruously at the top of his horn. He wore a white lab coat, and a small round mirror was strapped to his forehead. He never used the mirror in any way. "Hmm," he said as he held his stethoscope to the side of Charlie's neck, and "Hmm" again as he stood on a stepladder to peer down Charlie's throat, and "Hmm" one more time as he held Charlie's lapel between two fingers and looked at his watch.

"Well, doctor," said Jerry when the exam was finished, "what's wrong with him?"

"My examination has discovered no physical infirmities whatsoever. Superficially, he is salubrious as an equine."

"What?" said Charlie.

"Healthy as a horse," explained the doctor.

"I told you."

"But he's *seeing* things!" said Jerry.

"Indeed. These phantasmagorical manifestations are most worrisome," the doctor muttered, puffing on his pipe. A few small pink bubbles emerged as he pondered. "I recommend that we keep your friend under observation."

"How ironic," Charlie said to the wall, then returned his gaze to the doctor. "I am not seeing things, or hearing things! I just *know* things. Is that so bad?"

Jerry jumped up on the doctor's desk. "Charlie, listen to me. I'm your friend, right? I've never steered you wrong?"

"Of course not."

"Then get this through your thick purple skull. *There are no readers.* You are not the 'main character' in anyone's 'comical book.' You're just a person like anyone else, and you're here to muddle through your life the same as the rest of us. Nothing more."

"The veracity of your diminutive companion's statement is incontrovertible," said the doctor, waving his pipe. "These megalomaniacal misapprehensions must be immediately terminated. They jeopardize your physical integrity and the overall stability of the community."

"What?"

"You're a danger to yourself and others."

Charlie jumped out of his seat. "I'm no danger to anyone! So what if I talk to myself? That doesn't mean I'm going to pick up a big mallet and start flattening people!"

"Solipsistic delusions are frequently merely the initial manifestation of a general insensitivity to the legitimacy, even the existence, of external personalities. If allowed to go unchecked, these tendencies could escalate into antisocial or even injurious behavior!"

"What?"

"He thinks you might pick up a big mallet and start flattening people," said Jerry.

Charlie stood with his feet planted wide and his fists clenched. The white fabric of his gloves was bunched and strained. He stared at the wall. "You think this is funny, don't you?"

"Nobody's making any jokes here, Charlie," said Jerry. "We're serious."

"I wasn't talking to you." He turned around, pointed at a different spot on the wall. "This has all been arranged for *your* amusement! Are you happy?"

Jerry and Dr. Nocerous looked at each other.

Charlie pulled a big mallet from his pocket and began pounding on the wall. "Are you laughing now? Huh? Are you?" The WHAM of the mallet on the wall was huge and black. "Just let me get out there and I'll show you what comedy is all about!"

"This situation necessitates immediate incarceration!" said the doctor as he ran behind his desk.

"Ditto!" said Jerry as he dived under a chair.

The doctor pressed a button under the desk, no sound came out, but a few small lightning bolts appeared. Moments later two enormous gorillas, their white coats stretched taut over bulging muscles, burst through the door. There was a swirl of motion, and when it cleared Charlie was on the floor, trussed in a strait jacket.

"Don't let them put me away!" Charlie cried.

"It's for your own good," said Jerry, and waved encouragingly as the gorillas hustled Charlie away. But as soon as they were gone, Jerry's shoulders slumped. "What are you going to do, Doctor?"

"His prognosis is not encouraging. However, he will be the recipient of the most advanced experimental treatments modern medical technology has to offer." From his pocket, the doctor drew one end of a set of heavy jumper cables. Sparks flew from the sharp copper teeth as he touched them together, and a small, strange grin appeared on his face.

Charlie's sad, desperate eyes peered through the slot in the metal door. "You've got to get me out of here, Jerry." His word balloons squeezed through the slot like bubbles from a sinking ship.

"Hang in there, buddy. Dr. Nocerous tells me you're coming along nicely."

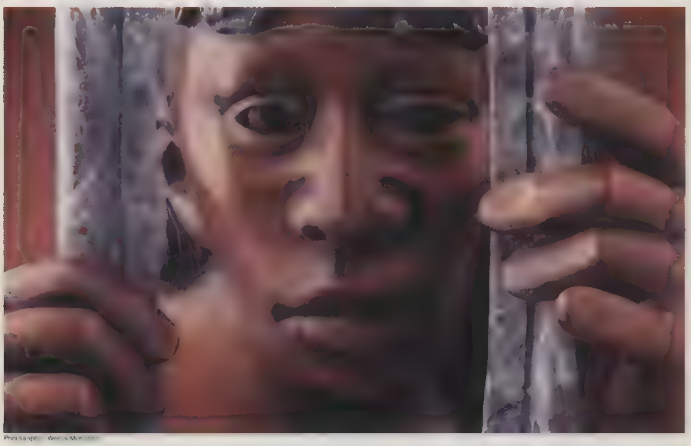
"He's been saying that for weeks." Charlie shook his head, bringing his blackened horns briefly into view. "But I know the score. I'm not going to get out of here until I show some improvement, but since there's nothing wrong with me I'm never going to get any better than I am now."

"Charlie, you must accept that you have a problem. It's the first step on the road to recovery."

Charlie chuckled ruefully. "I have a problem, all right. I've learned that there are worse things than being laughed at."

"Nobody's laughing at you, Charlie. You need to understand that these 'readers' are nothing

*Continued on page 90*



Photographer: Wendy McMillan

BY ARI BERK

*...ancient Spirit, Modern Voice: The Mythic Journey" exhibition" will be on display at the Defoor Centre Art Gallery in Atlanta from May 1-June 12, 2004. This multicultural exhibition features artists such as Alan Lee Meiners, Craigbead, Brian Froud, Stu Jones, Lorenzo Scott, Roxanne Swentzell, Gabriel Ben-Amie, Greg Spalenka, Mara Friedman, Helena Nelson-Reed, and exciting works from the Southern African American vernacular tribe and Australian Aboriginal, Native North American, and Central American tribes. The exhibit, coordinated and curated by Charles Vess and Karen Shaffer, contains over one hundred paintings, sculptures, prints, and photographs that depict a variety of traditions of myth, story, and ritual.*

A poet so clear it cannot be made out
But light shimmers between two worlds.
— from the poem Dew and Night by Ri Ko Ryoku

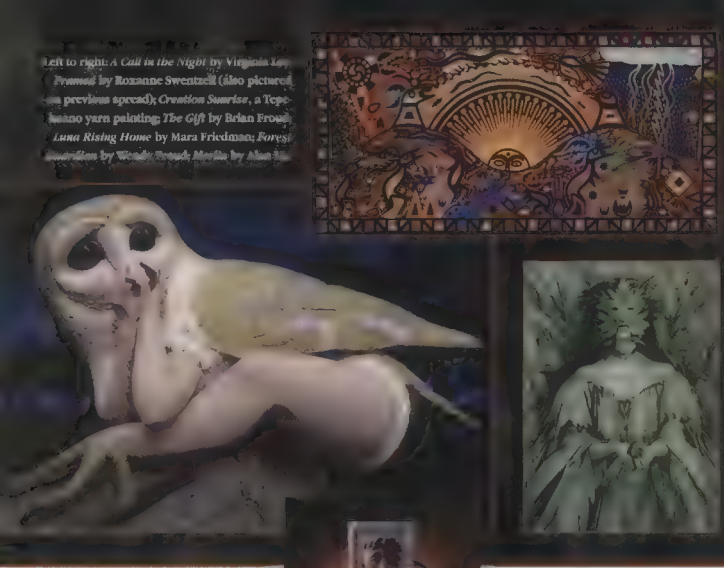
A multicultural art exhibit boasts the work of over 20 artists whose imagery draws on myth, folklore, and vision to craft evocative imagery that resonates deeply with the mythic heart of the human spirit

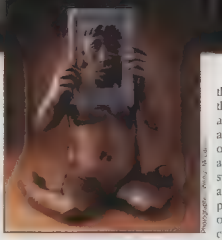
# Ancient Spirit, Modern Voice– Art as Myth

The earliest human images were rendered in pigment and ash upon the walls of caves, invoking lions, horses, light, and darkness. Those pictographic myths danced and dreamed within the earth and then took other shapes: small carvings of secret gods hidden within stone, antler, and bone. Such images reveal flights of the shamanic mind, shifts of consciousness, and exchanges across boundaries—from vision to incarnation, from perception to form, from artist to beholder.

From guarding sacred tombs and Otherworlds, the creation of art has always been a ritual matter. From the spiraled stones of Newgrange to a painted rock screen, from lines tattooed upon the skin of the body to the arrangement of horses in the grave of a Scythian queen, each informs a portion of a map that might, if we dared follow it, lead us back to the first lighting of the stars. These ritual presentations may take many forms, but each is always, in part, an attempt to express that which is ultimately inexplicable.

Left to right: *A Call in the Night* by Virginia Lee; *Promise* by Roxanne Swentzell (also pictured on previous spread); *Creation Sunrise*, a Tepehuano yarn painting; *The Gift* by Brian Frost; *Luna Rising Home* by Mara Friedman; *Forest Guardian* by Wendy Brouch; *Merlin* by Alan Lee





Photographer: Arthur McClain

Ovid speaks to this ritual of making in the beginning of his *Metamorphoses*, when as artist-creator, he breathes life and order into his studio of "scumbled elements." Of course, he is speaking of the beginnings of the earth, but he uses the process and language of an artist. He considers the pieces of his composition, his raw materials, as an "undigested mass," scattered but full of potential. His poem invokes "a nameless god, and nature," which together end the strife of a world existing "before the sea and lands began to be." Each element of the world is then composed and assigned its place, "linked . . . all in peace." And from this process—so familiar to every artist—the canvases of creation are prepared.

Like individual tales joined together to form an epic, these works in proximity to each other generate a palpable and compelling force on the imagination. One piece will affect the perception you have of the next, or change your interpretation of the one before. Yet even when considered singly, such works do not exist in isolation. They are crossroads: axes the confluence of innumerable rivers whose courses we have followed since we first wandered dreaming out onto the land. These ancient streams still sustain and inspire us. By carving out sensual landscapes peopled by gods and spirits, they course through the world, making it explorable, habitable, and familial. Each place or being speaks its name and tells its tale, ensuring that something of its nature be remembered in the permanence of a physical artifact.

Although deliberately fashioned objects, these works of art need not necessarily be thought of as artificial. Levi-Strauss insists that a myth cannot be translated by anything except another myth; thus, art making becomes a kind of meaning making, a turning-over of a tale, an attempt to arrive at a new or deeper understanding by rendering the myth again in another form. The products of this visionary process are neither imitations nor recreations of myths: they are myths themselves—often compressed, but whole and redolent with narrative and symbolic potential. Alan Garner speaks to this paradox when he says, "What we feel most deeply cannot be spoken in words. At this level only images connect. And so story becomes symbol, and symbol is myth."

Inspired by the essential human desire to create and maintain a dialogue of reciprocity with the storied lands around us, such symbols inhere within the natural world, continually returning us to restorative landscapes: the sky, the forest, the sea, the underworld, the garden, the cave, the arms of a mother. There are voices in such creations, and in their origins: ancestors and gods and the call of the river. Seen in this way, we find these works become like opened agates in our hands, revealing a glittering world of stars where once we saw only the water-worn surface of a stone.

When considered as myths, these works of art will also challenge the viewer's expectations. There are many questions implicit within

each of them, forming complex and subtle initiations that are by their nature invitational, threatening, and intimate By considering even the simplest-seeming images in myth, by challenging both our senses and our preconceptions, we may receive—like those who sit upon the Mound of Arberth in the Welsh *Mabinogion*—both blows and wonders. Journeys in the Otherworld beget wondrous encounters. we find those in abundance within these artists' creations We view their works and find ourselves at a threshold Just ahead, figures form in the twilight

A Woman of the Wood hidden behind a mask of leaves. She has seen the fading light upon the boles, she says She has been waiting for you, she says Trees grow in a tangle from the knoll behind her She holds the heart of the forest in her hands. A gift, she says

A stag of innumerable tines, warden of the ways, the moon and night-mist caught in the boughs of his antlers. His breath and tracks are invitations to wander between the worlds under his care

Women of the village, painted, dancing, Dreaming, the evening star newly born above them. They will sing until morning, when the men return home from the bush

A *curandero* garners his gifts from the Sun He sends out his helpers Sacred water is brought back from the mountains Hummingbird talks to the sky and asks for rain. Remember the gods, the scorpion will tell you

An Anubian pack of dogs, carefully walking a path into the West, the light of sunrise hidden below their fur

A guardian of the grove, grown bold beneath the moon, dancing out from the heartwood toward the hedgerow

# The moment we emerges and the

The dark, kind goddess with all seeing hands, mystery upon mystery buried, beneath her throne. Black birds move about the green and burning tree that forms her crown.

Adam and Eve upon the road, feast behind them, famine ahead.

The Corn King among the yellow trees. Autumn fading like the sun at his shoulder. Take first and last fruits of the harvest are his by right.

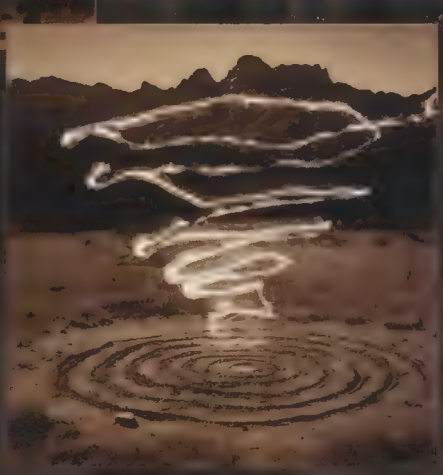
Owl-girl, lonely by the tree-line, sings to the little lights moving along the road. You will want to follow that enticing tune right off the path beyond the trees, into the deep, but remember: her talons are sharp and that night song is not for you.

A wounded muse. Bare-breasted and drunk. Wise and wild in her cape of bear fur. Her words you may trust because they have been paid for.

Mother and child. She will hold him for a time in peace, but soon she must give him to the waiting world. The angels will tell you this if you ask them.

A lone white flower emerges into the night while the mother of evening begins her dance. Both are radiant in the sublunary light.

A sleeper dreams beside her winged lover. They are attended in their bower by Crow, and Moth, and the Dragonflies of Evening-tide.



# REGARD A WORK OF ART, A CONVERSATION ARTIST'S QUEST BECOMES OUR QUEST.

Upon their customary carpet the idle children of Minos converse about their unfortunate upbringing before returning to their hiding places.

An exposed relic of enlightenment cast upon a far-distant shore. Because its eyes are closed, the light of a thousand years must seek another avenue.

Mad Merlin dreaming in the wood, his limbs become limbs of trees and hedges. Saplings hold his visions to the ground. A stream winds about his feet, moss grafting to his ankles. His bones are branches straining to escape his skin.

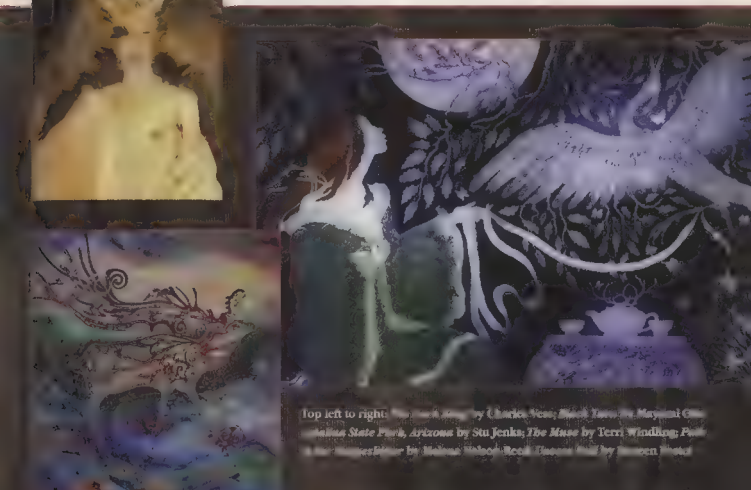
Here is the Emergence Place, the confluence of earth and fire. A path below, a path above, and you must choose a way.

Earth Woman regards you from beyond a frame. Dreamer and dreamed, subject and object revolve. Try to remember your name.

Essentially, this exhibition follows the pilgrimages of these artists into the realms of wonder. Their hieroglyphic travelogues, here experienced as painting, drawing, sculpture, print, and photograph, are for us to decipher. Such journeys do not end when we leave the gallery or close the book. Here they begin.

The moment we regard a work of art, a conversation emerges and the artist's quest becomes our quest. A gift is passed from the artist's hands to ours. We must then decide whether to return home to the merely familiar, or to continue on the path that presents itself, making the Otherworld our world. On such a journey we may find what we have been seeking since the beginning—to see a vision that will neither fade nor diminish, to see within our own tale something that might—that must—endure, to see at last the stars within the stones.

*Ancient Spirit, Modern Voice™ is part of Mythic Journeys, a conference/performance festival in celebration of the Joseph Campbell Centennial. The first annual Mythic Journeys will bring together more than a hundred of the world's leading scholars, psychologists, educators, business leaders, artists, authors, filmmakers, and performers for an unprecedented dialogue on myth, ritual, and tradition in contemporary life from June 3-6, 2004 at the Atlanta Hyatt Regency Hotel. A complete list of program participants and sponsors, as well as registration information and online forms, is available at www.mythicjourneys.org or by calling (404) 832-4112.*



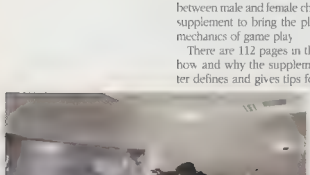
Top left to right: [illegible] by Charles Vess; *Black Tower* by Maynard Dixon; *Salinas State Park, Arizona* by Stu Jenks; *The Muse* by Terri Windling; *Pan* by [illegible]; [illegible] by Melissa Vukovich Reed; *Heaven and Earth* by Maureen Hyde

By Eric T. Baker

# The issue of player gender is solved in a new supplement to *Sorcerer.*

*Sex and Sorcery* is not the personal self-help manual that its title might lead you to believe it is. It is a game-help supplement to Ron Edwards' Diana Jones-award-winning pen and dice role-playing game, *Sorcerer*. *S&S* is the third supplement to the game. It is about the fact that game players, and often the characters they create, come in two sexes. Most designers write role-playing games as if both the players and their characters were all one sex. There are some RPGs that distinguish between male and female characters, but *S&S* is probably the first supplement to bring the players' own genders into the actual mechanics of game play.

There are 112 pages in the book. The first chapter explains how and why the supplement came to be. The second chapter defines and gives tips for running two different categories of male and female stories. The third and fourth chapters are a female and a male story based campaigns, with Chapter 4 also including expanded rules for Wuxia martial arts. Chapters 5 and 6 bring it all together in a full campaign on an alien world where both male and female players and characters are forced to confront both male and female stories. The last section lays out Edwards' "Player Gender Rules."



What makes *Sorcerer* and its supplements different from most RPGs is that Edwards writes them as a combination of polemic and rules, doing it in such a way that one never interferes with the other. *S&S* is in this same style, but it has the hardest slope to climb. Despite the many stories that any gamer group can tell of incidents when the sex of the players directly affected the game, it is an article of faith in the culture that acknowledging the tensions will somehow make them worse. *S&S* makes the case that an awareness of gender can actually make the game more fun.

*ABOVE* Jet-Li: Rise of Honor *has the look of Li's Hong Kong movies* *RIGHT* The Diamond Throne *is a sourcebook for* Arcana Unearthed

The Player Gender Rules themselves, when the reader finally gets to them, are surprisingly simple, straightforward, and free of stereotype, but they do make the players' gender a part of the game. As with the books before it, the thoughts and techniques in *S&S* make *Sorcerer* an even better game than it already is. Plus, with a little work, they can be applied to any RPG to make it better.

*Jet Li: Rise of Honor* is an action game for the PS2 that tries to take the look and feel of Li's Hong Kong movies to the video game console. Li provided the martial arts moves via motion capture, and fight choreographer Cory Yuen strung the moves together. Hong Kong action to video game action is a well-worn

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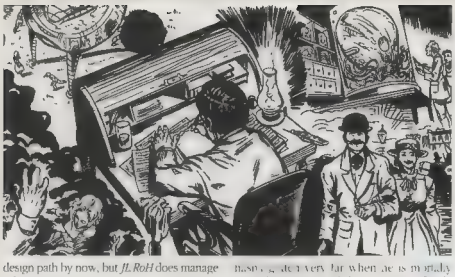


design path by now, but *JL RoH* does manage a few new moves

The plot of *JL RoH* is as much a genre standby as the two guns that Li wields Li's character is called Kit Yun. He's the top bodyguard of a crime lord When the lord is killed, Kit is given the mission of finding the lord's daughter and returning her safely to San Francisco Along the way he has to beat up, shoot, and avoid a horde of hoods and cops who also want the girl

In play, it isn't Li's moves or Yuen's choreography that set the game apart, although both are good What is different about *JL RoH* is the way the player controls it. Instead of the traditional buttons to launch Kit's attacks, this game uses the right joystick Pushing the stick toward an opponent unleashes a strike These attacks can be modified and improved on by combining the stick move with pressing combinations of the triggers. The advantage of this system is that it allows Kit to strike in any direction without having to turn to face each opponent in turn It takes some adapting, as players will find themselves trying to make Kit punch and kick using the button layouts of other games. Once the new scheme is mastered, *JL RoH* becomes a fast and violent ride, almost as good as the films

*Drakengard* is the new hybrid RPG Rail Shooter for the PS2 from Square Enix, the company famous for the *Final Fantasy* series What *Drakengard* shares with that series are amazing cut scenes and an enormously complicated plot Beyond that, *Drakengard* is very different, both in how it plays and in its tone This game tells a very dark story

The setup is simple enough The warrior prince Caim is trying to find and protect his sister Furaie, the last family he has left Caim has spent years searching for her when he is mortally wounded, as is a red dragon Caim's family has suffered greatly from the attentions of dragons, but if the two beings bind their souls they can each live The bargain is made and the two resume Caim's quest

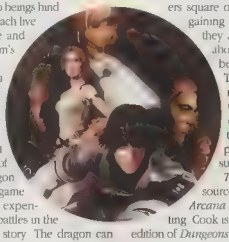
The human on a dragon's back for half the game will remind players of *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, with lesser graphics but much more freedom of movement The dragon even morphs as the game goes on and earns experience points, but the battles in the air are only half the story The dragon can land Caim, allowing the prince to deal more death on the ground with up to 64 weapons by the time all 13 chapters of the game have been completed

The combination of air and ground battles is a neat gimmick, but it is much more likely to be the cut scenes and the story they unfold that pulls players through the game.

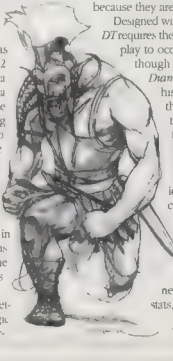
Another hybrid game is Lucas Art's *Wrath Unleashed* for the PS2 and Xbox, which combines a turn-based strategy game with a fighting game The players take the roles of demigods, battling other demigods for the power to achieve full godhood. The battle takes place on a series of boards where each demi god sets up their army of mythic creatures The creatures are moved around the board like chess pieces, but when enemies arrive in the same square, the view transforms to an arena representing the square, and the two monsters have it out

The mechanics of *WU* work better than they sound In the strategic game, the demi-gods and their sorcerer minion can cast spells that kill or resurrect the monsters, or spells that change the terrain of the board Mana pools that have to be captured by monsters to convey any benefit limit this magic There is not a lot of mana about, so spells do not dominate the game Strategy in the board portion of the game is important to setting up the fighting part of it No matter how good a player is at pushing the buttons and chaining combinations, a centaur is not going to beat a fire giant When the matches are more even, they are more challenging and more fun

There are a variety of ways to play *WU* Each demigod has a story mode where one player takes each one through four levels, ultimately unlocking the demi-god's full god form There is also a quick battle mode that allows players to face off against each other the computer, or both The main game, however, is the campaign mode where the players square off against the computer, gaining power and monsters as they advance. The neat thing about this mode is that it can be played cooperatively Two players can gang up on the computer Given the lack of good cooperative games on the market, this mode is particularly welcome in a surprisingly fun game



*The Diamond Throne* is a sourcebook for Monte Cook's *Arcana Unearthed* campaign setting Cook is a codesigner of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and author of some of the best, most inventive books for that game The greatest difference in his approach to the *AU* material and the *D&D* material is that in the world of *AU* there are no alignments, which means that whole races cannot be targeted as cannon fodder because they are "evil "



Designed with game masters in mind *DT* requires the main *AU* book for actual play to occur. This is because even though the largest part of *The Diamond Throne* is a 40-page history and description of the land and its peoples, the section has no statistics or physical descriptions of the races who inhabit the lands Nor are there statistics for the various important nonplayer characters mentioned in the history and setting The subsequent chapters that list eight new prestige classes, lots of magic goodies, and 12 new monsters do have stats, of course

For GMs who like idea books, this is a great

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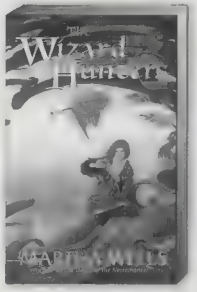


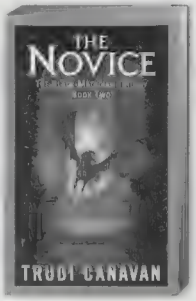


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supplement. Between the adventure idea section and all the history, months-long campaigns could easily be created. For GMs who are more paint-by-numbers, there isn't much they can do with this book. Nothing in it is ready to run. For the vast majority of GMs who lie somewhere in between, and who like the *AU* milieu, this is a supplement well worth the money.

The *War of the Worlds Sourcebook* from Gold Rush Games is as much H.G. Wells' classic as it is a gaming supplement. The first 65 pages of the 112-page book are devoted to reprinting the novel, with brand new illustrations. This may be the most complete providing of a supplement's original source material in the history of gaming.

The actual sourcebook part of the supplement includes an introduction by science fiction author James L. Cambias. It has summaries and descriptions of the people and places in the novel as well as statistics in both the Action! and D20 formats to let GMs run adventures based on the book. There is also a chapter on adapting the book to other time periods or running a campaign around Martian invasions that took a different turn than those of the book. There is even a short section on how to pit the Martians against the giant Japanese monsters portrayed in the game *Monster Island*.

Overall it is a very useful book, although obviously at its best when portraying Edwardian England, the setting of Wells' book. There is a nice but small section on portraying the 1938 Martian invasion as performed by Orson Wells on the radio. Other ideas for other Martian scenarios are interesting, but anything other than the baseline, turn-of-the-century England background is going to require substantially more work by the GM. ❧

# tiny bells

*Continued from page 44*

Had they come to us alive, strangers fleeing before soldiers, we would have turned them away. They were not like us. We built our houses square and true. Icons blessed us from our walls. We spoke the Emperor's own tongue, feasted on the proper holy days.

But they came one by one, an old man to an old man so that they both remembered the same droughts and floods. They came one by one, a young mother to a young mother so that they knew the same weariness of waking throughout the night and the same joy. They came one by one, a child as another child's playmate.

In dreams, I tended my flocks with the man who had a black ram. He taught me a song that I remembered when I awoke and I sang it as I took my flock to pasture under the waking sun. In dreams, my daughter learned a game that she played with the other children when their chores were done. In dreams, my wife learned to make a yellow tea that she poured when I returned hungry and tired. It was good. I sang her the song, explained the words that were strange. Some of them she already knew.

Asleep, I asked the man why he hung a green branch over his door. Asleep, I asked him how he dyed wool blue. Asleep, I asked him who the traders were who would trade for tiny bells. My daughter wanted some to tie at her wrist.

In the spring, our village smelled sweeter for the branches over our doors. In the summer, our daughters jingled wherever they went.

The Emperor's campaign in the east was long. When the soldiers finally returned to our valley, there were not so many of them as before. They looked harder and bigger. Their general rode among us. He told the men to take everything—every lamb, every grain of wheat.

"But we are the Emperor's own people!" we said.

"Are you indeed?" said the general, and the way he shaped the words was strange in our ears.

We brought icons from our houses to show him.

Soldiers lit torches from our cook fires.

I tore the green branch from my house and flung it to the ground. Women wept and clawed at the bells on their daughters' wrists. The general drew his sword. The soldiers drew theirs.

Sleeper, I am a dream. Once I dreamed as you now dream, woke as you will awaken. Now I am a shadow of memory—your memory, if you will give me refuge. And here is my brother, who once tended a flock as I tended mine, who had a black ram, who was a stranger to me, but no longer. We were driven from our homes and from this world. Take us in. Give us a place here in your dreams. ❧

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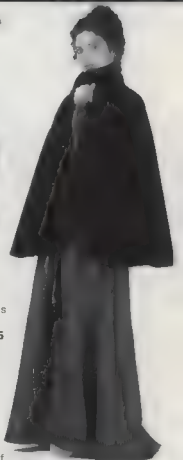

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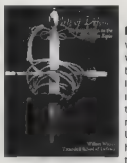

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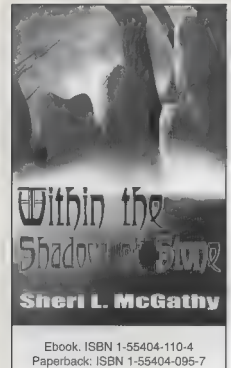


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## windhover

*Continued from page 65*

a lump of something that glowed pale in the candlelight. To Serena he said, "Just watch. Don't be afraid."

The guest nearest to the door was a woman. If she had to, Serena thought, she could make a run for it, shove the woman aside, the guest was a small person, bird-boned. But what of the others?

The woman was staring at her, a sharp, black-eyed gaze.

"Why the girl, Hugh?" she said.

Sayet took a strand of Serena's hair and drew it absently through his fingers.

"Have you ever seen anything so pale? He'll like that, don't you think? Perhaps more than some peasant's head? And when he likes something, he can be very generous."

Serena drew away and Sayet smiled. He knelt to inscribe a circle upon the stone floor. The thing handed to him by the woman had been a piece of chalk, Serena realized.

Within the circle, he sketched a swift figure: the image of a man, faceless, holding two staves. It was as familiar to Serena as the moon or the sun: it was the Long Man of Windhover Down. The guests joined hands, began to chant the prayer to the Lords of Earth.

*"May the Dragon of the Dales be our Protector"*

and the room grew suddenly furnace hot, the walls glowing russet—

*May the Scarab of the Tor be our Initiator*

something clicking in the wainscoting, a spiny shadow above her head—

*May the Lamptown Wyrm guide our feet upon the land"—*

and her hands were coated with slime, a cold chill on her brow—

*"and may the Long Man ever watch over us according to the terms of our King's bargain"*

—and Serena was standing on the hillside, high on Windhover Down. The Long Man towered above her, rising from the side of the hill, no longer a flat chalk image but bone grinding on bone, the jaw teeth-filled. Something filled her mouth, a dry, schoolroom odor. She spat, tasting chalk, and looked up to see a staff sweeping through the air like a scythe.

Serena did not stay to meet it. She darted forward, between skeletal legs, and cannoned into something warm and yielding. A woman's voice cried out, and Serena realized that she was still in the small chamber, surrounded by the master and his guests. She pushed the woman aside and tugged at the door. It opened, and she fell through into the dining room. The candles were burning down, and the table had been emptied of everything except the platter that carried the head. The vines still coiled from its mouth, her grandmother's voice echoed in her mind.

*The real honor—the blood honor—went to the Green Man. That's how you summon all of them, no matter what their nature.*

Serena ran to the table. Bones clattered behind her. She took the small, gold knife and held out her hand.

"Here!" she cried. "You can't be any worse than them!" and she sliced the knife across her wrist.

Blood spattered across the severed head of George Hamp. Vines curled into sudden green life and the sewn-shut eyes flew open. Light poured through them, sealing the door of the chamber behind her. She looked back to see Hugh Sayet and the guests trapped like flies in amber. And the head spoke.

"Do you think no one has yet tried to bring me back?" It said. It was not Hamp's voice, but a furred, thick speech.

"I thought—" Serena's wrist burned; she clasped a hand to it.

"You thought it would be simple. It is. The charm is an old one: a virgin, dying willingly for the land, the Sovereign Queen. The simple folk could not find one such, the last time this was tried. For the key is willingness."

"If I die, willingly, will the power of the Figures fade?"

"It will change," the head said. Serena risked a glance behind her. The light was beginning to break down; she could see Sayet starting to move again, sluggish and slow. She thought of the life ahead of her, of her mother. She thought of the people taken, one every year from all the villages around, from all the towns of the southern counties, of the nightmare voices in the head as the ancient spirits that lay behind the Figures whispered to their victims. She thought of Hamp's infant son, who would, perhaps, go the way of his father if the mark fell on him.

"Then I will do it," she said. She brought the knife down again, opening up the arm. It did not hurt as much as she had expected. She stood, watching the blood flow, until she felt. She heard a bony footstep behind her, but it was too late. There was a skeletal rattle as something slunk back into the ground; others followed it. She heard nothing more.

Serena awoke. She was lying on frosty grass, with a bitter wind blowing from the east. Yet she was not cold. There was no sign of Sayet, or the guests, or the head. She could see the manor lying in the valley below, wreathed in the early morning mists. She must have found her way here after escaping and fallen unconscious. But when she tried to rise, she could not. She looked down at herself.

She had no body any longer. There was only the outline of a chalk figure in the grass, a woman's form, wreathed in spirals of pale hair. But she could feel the land around her like her own self, stretching as far as the sea and the distant hills, and so she knew when the first visitors arrived, carrying gifts of crimson leaves, and apples, and the fruits of the season. ❧

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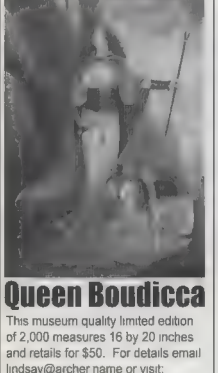

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## stalking

*Continued from page 51*

"But they—they were the thirty-five, surely, the ones you intend to destroy—"

She did not care that she had revealed her knowledge. And he—he laughed.

His laugh. She stared, enraptured and transfixed. It was like the most astounding symphony, distilled to a single cadence. The laughter ended. He said, quite gently, "You have applied the idea of thirty-five wrongly. Thirty-five is the number of the *last* one to die in Dophan tonight. You see, thirty-four are already dead."

Something cool and static was in Avly's mind and changed everything in her, excitement, hope, lust—bone, sinew, blood—to a fluid silence.

She looked away from him as if it had always been easy.

The flyer, returning now to its shed in Indigo, was rising once again, more steadily than before. It chugged over the unlit buildings, and far beyond and behind, Avly noticed, indifferently, the bright towers and mansions of the better quarters, bangled with their lamps.

And, I," she whispered, "am to be the thirty-fifth person. I'm the last one who will die tonight." Then she gazed back at him. He too seemed farther off, but curiously, also near. She knew him, after all. Perhaps she had done so from the first. Doubtless anyone would.

Nevertheless she asked, "Who are you?"

"Death," he responded.

The next moment the failing flyer, its systems most unusually, but not quite impossibly, breaking down, plummeted from the sky to smash a vast crater in the wilderness of weeds and ruins at the edge of the Orange Quarter.

No one resided immediately in the neighborhood, either to be fatally struck by the car or to witness the solitary passenger who left the wreckage and strode away without a backward glance. He was a tall man with long, dark hair and a cloak as black as the grave. ❧

The *Ancient Myth*

A servant ran to his master, a merchant, in great fear, saying that he had met Death in the marketplace, and she had made a threatening gesture at him. The servant begged the merchant to let him fly at once to Bokhara, many miles away. The merchant agreed, and the servant speedily rode off. Later that same day, the merchant himself happened to see Death in the city. He drew her aside and asked why she had frightened his servant with a gesture of threat. "No, he mistook me," said Death. "The gesture I made was in fact one of surprise at seeing him here—for tonight I have an appointment with him, in Bokhara."

*The Thousand Nights and a Night*

## the archer

*Continued from page 69*

She blinks and is standing alone on a rooftop with the god, her father. A great sadness rests in his eyes, but no tears. "I am sorry, daughter."

"It's all right," she lies, again.

"This will hurt more than any lonely night I should have told you before."

Again, she surprises them both by laughing. "At least it will be a different type of pain." And sees pride in the face of the god.

They return downstairs.

"Can I do anything for you before you go?"

He has stopped on the far side of the room, as if he were afraid to come any closer. For the moment, he looks very much the child. The thought reminds her of the painting. The painting of the god and the woman he loved. The first of two. In the painting, his wings are absurdly small.

"Can I … can I see your wings?"

They fill the room. The sun falls away and a million feathers, innocent white, stretch out as if to envelop the world. They are the most beautiful thing Denise Legamos has ever seen. He is.

"Father . ." She thinks of the first time they met. She had been standing in front of a mirror, a yearning question on her mind. What does the world see?

"Father, am I beautiful?"

"Oh, daughter." The wings drop slightly, then fold inward and he crosses the room. Soft hands, soft like the first kiss you receive in your crib, reach up and cup her cheeks. "Your mother caught the heart of two of the gods. How could you be anything less than beautiful?"

A small, warm coal in her heart.

An odd timidity crosses his face. "We do not have the greatest record of parental commitment, we gods. But—if you would like to … come and visit me again—you may. If you would like."

"Yes, Father." The word sounds round and full in her mouth. She smiles. "Next time, I'll bring the wine."

She takes four steps from her father's apartment, thinks of Steven, and begins to weep. She does not know how long it takes her to walk home. Time does not pass for the broken-hearted.

When she arrives in her apartment, there is a message on the answering machine. She stares out the window for an indefinite amount of time until there is a knock on the door.

She turns. There will be a look and words from him as if he understood her pain. A thought strikes her: perhaps he does.

Then she smiles suddenly, despite the ache in her heart.

As if.

Smiling, Denise Legamos reaches for the door. ❧

*"For the warriors, may they keep their hearts open.*
*For those who make decisions and hold sway over others, may they do the same, only more so.*
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*this story."*

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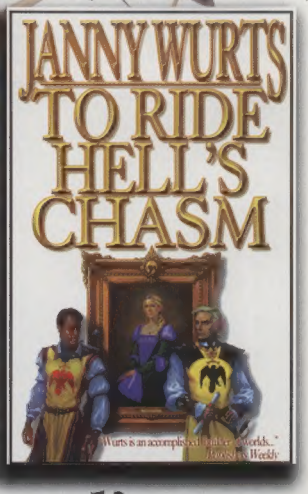


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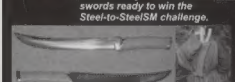

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## charlie

*Continued from page 73*

more than a projection of your own feelings of self-doubt and inconsequentiality."

"That's just what the rhino told you to say. But you're right—nobody's laughing at me. The *readers* aren't laughing at me. And that's the problem."

"I thought you didn't want them to laugh at you."

"I didn't. But since I've been here in this padded cell, tied up in this strait jacket all day long with nothing to do ... they're *bored*."

"Well, that's an improvement, isn't it? Maybe now they'll watch someone else instead."

"They've tried. But—no insult intended—none of you guys are as funny as I am." Jerry's tail bristled. "So they're leaving. They're going away completely. And that scares me."

"You should be glad to be rid of them!" Jerry fumed.

Charlie's eyes closed for a moment. When they opened again, Jerry saw a bit of the old manic fervor. "Listen ... do you ever think about the nature of time?"

"What?"

"Time. How it passes, from moment to moment. Haven't you ever noticed how some things change when you aren't looking at them?"

"Like the wallpaper?"

"Exactly. I believe that time is ... divided. Into moments, or segments. Within each segment we are alive and awake, but in between ... there are gaps. That's when things change."

"What does this have to do with anything?"

"I think the readers live their lives in the gaps between our time segments. They live in our time too, somehow—I know because they can see us. But in the gaps ... they have the universe to themselves."

"Charlie, you're not making any sense."

"I know it sounds crazy. But I'm dead serious. And here's the important part: When the readers aren't watching us ... *we don't exist!*"

Jerry shook his head and turned away, but after a moment's thought he turned back. "OK. Suppose I accept this theory of yours. Suppose there *are* gaps between moments. But time still *feels* continuous to us. See?" He waved a paw rapidly back and forth. "So it doesn't really matter!"

"It doesn't matter as long as they keep coming back. But if too many of them get bored ... if they all go away and don't come back ... then the gap will just go on and on, and we'll never exist again. It'll be the end of the world, Jerry. Squashed flat in the dark, forever." Charlie's eyes were desperate, sincere, pleading. "You've got to get me out of here. I'll joke, I'll pratfall, I'll do anything to keep the readers coming back. To keep us all alive. Please."

Jerry closed his eyes, unable to bear his friend's gaze. "There are no readers, Charlie."

In the end, he was right.

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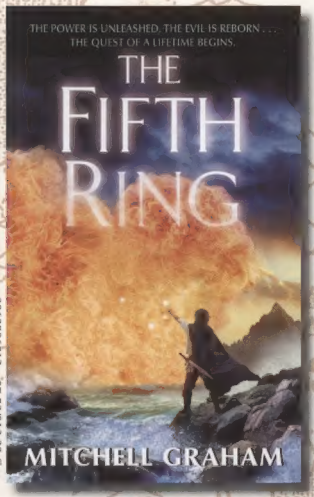


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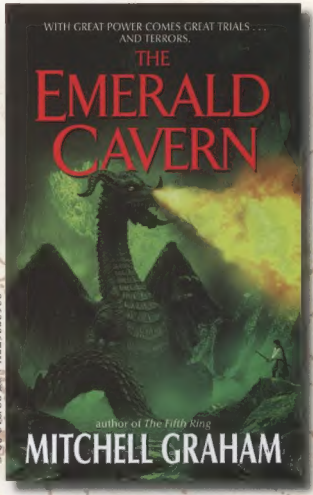


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